

EMPATHETIC COMMUNICATION FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG CHILDREN

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Abstract

This article presents an empathy-focused approach to conflict resolution among children that is applicable in schools and other settings. The authors illustrate the approach with a case example and with role definitions for speakers, listeners, and facilitators. The authors assert that complete communication (having children in conflict listen to one another and then empathically respond to one another without judgment or bias) is a highly effective and powerful means to conflict resolution. Important interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits include: increased self-efficacy and self-reliance, increased respect for self and others, increased empathy and emotional maturity, and increased skills in developing meaningful friendships. Further, this model may help prevent school violence resulting from children feeling ostracized and unheard. Additional applications are also discussed.

Empathic Communication for Conflict Resolution Among Children

It's a sunny morning at Rosedale Elementary School. The teachers on bus duty smile and say "good morning" to the children as they exit the buses. The school counselor greets the children while simultaneously scanning the scene. So many children in so many different moods. Some are jumping and hollering, some are slumping and rubbing their sleepy eyes, but most are laughing and chatting noisily with friends. Suddenly a crowd forms around two scuffling fifth grade boys. The school counselor makes a way through the crowd and calmly, but firmly, encourages the other children move on to class. The two boys are now in a stand off, glaring angrily at one another. "Looks like you guys are in a conflict," the school counselor states matter-of-factly and without accusation. The boys immediately clamber for attention, attempting to lay blame and explain how the other has wronged him. The school counselor calmly states, "You both are angry and you both want to be heard. Let's find a place so we can solve this." The school counselor then begins to guide the two boys to a quiet area of the playground. As they walk along the boys continue to grumble and mumble, but they are no longer pushing and shoving. The school counselor ignores the mumbling and grumbling, takes a moment to enjoy the morning sunshine, and remains silent.

These boys, Ed and Nate, have been in several recent arguments. Their primary teacher has previously referred them to the school office for discipline in response to their arguments, which disrupt class. She states, "Neither will give in... both stubbornly blame one another...there's not enough time to see who is at fault!"

Such conflicts among children are common. Counselors and other adults charged with the care and education of children are faced with a need to find resolution to such conflicts in order to facilitate the academic, social, and emotional development of children. Children need to learn to resolve conflicts, since resolution methods do not always seem to develop naturally. Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, and Acikgoz (1994) found that before teaching children to resolve conflict the majority of their elementary school study population referred conflicts to teachers for their adult judgment, or attempted to use punitive or destructive strategies that escalated the conflict. Many conflict resolution models are focused on mediation, negotiation, or problem solving (Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Sweeney & Carruthers, 1996). Although such models utilize communication between the two children in conflict as *part* of the process, typically a mediator is ultimately relied on to interpret events, offer advice, and help the two children in dispute make decisions based on external factors such as avoiding punishment, or gaining external rewards and attention from others. Based on our experiences in working with children in conflict, we advocate an approach for conflict resolution among children that is *primarily focused on empathic listening and communication*. Our empathic communication-focused approach for conflict resolution is based on the

Relationship Enhancement model (Guerney, 1977), as well as a more person-centered approach applied to settling conflicts among children. We have used our empathic communication-focused approach to conflict resolution in a variety of school, camp, and other child activity settings. We find that with complete empathic communication, other actions such as negotiation, problem solving and advice often become unnecessary or occur naturally among children, without prompting from adults. We also find that conflict resolution that focuses on empathic listening and communication brings about additional interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits such as increased self-esteem and self-reliance, increased respect for self and others, increased empathy and emotional maturity, and increased skills in developing meaningful friendships.

The Empathic Communication-Focused Approach Applied

Returning to our case example at Rosedale Elementary School, we find the school counselor and the two boys, Ed and Nate, sitting in a quiet area under a tree. The school counselor stops Ed and Nate from explaining their opposing cases to him. Instead, he explains to them that he cannot solve their conflict for them, but is confident that they can resolve it and thus avoid further trouble. He explains that they will need to talk to each other in a special way to resolve their conflict, and tells them that he would like for them to learn communication for conflict resolution. The boys hesitantly agree.

The school counselor seats the boys facing each other at a comfortable distance apart for talking. He reminds them that they will talk to each other, not to him. Both boys have difficulty looking at each other at this point. They continually look toward the counselor, or look down and around. Nate keeps a steady gaze on his hands, picking at his nails, and cracking his knuckles. The school counselor notices, and reflects the difficulty the boys are having by saying, "This feels different, and it's hard at first. But now you are sitting across from each other getting ready to listen." He explains that one will be the speaker first, the other the listener, and that they will change roles when the speaker is satisfied that the listener has *really heard* and understood his side of the story. Careful to keep his explanations brief, the counselor role-plays and models as necessary to help the boys understand the following rules for the speaker and listener roles in an empathic communication-focused approach to conflict resolution.-- a. language applicable and understandable to children rather than adults.

Rules for the Speaker

Rules for the empathic communication-focused approach follow. They are based on the Guerney (1977) Relationship Enhancement model with modifications made by the authors, to tailor

1. Tell your side of the conflict.

2. Speak to the listener, not the facilitator (in this case the school counselor).
3. Generally, look the speaker in the eyes, when you talk to him/her. This is a general direction, as constant eye contact would be highly unusual, but frequent eye contact increases the empathic nature, and attention to feelings during the communication.
4. When possible, state emotions you feel related to the conflict.
5. Work to focus your statements on yourself. In other words, tell your own story.

Rules for the Listener

1. Look the speaker in the eyes.
2. Every now and then stop and say back *what the speaker says to you*.
3. Follow rule #2 even if you don't believe what the speaker said is true. Say what the speaker says back to the speaker. *Tell the story exactly like it is told, or summarize.*
4. State feelings that the speaker expresses. If you think the speaker feels something about the story say, "When you tell your story, it looks like you feel..."
5. Accept corrections from the speaker. Don't disagree. You'll get a chance to be speaker.
6. When you are able to summarize the speaker's communication *to his/her satisfaction*, and without corrections, it is time to switch roles. Then it will be time for you to tell your story, and for the first speaker to be the listener.

The rules for the facilitator are as follows:

Rules for the Facilitator

1. Be sure the speaker and listener observe the rules. (At times the spirit of the rules is more important than the details. For example, eye contact is helpful, but it is not a staring contest, one can look away. Often *any* eye contact between children while talking will help to bring feelings to the surface and will encourage more direct, honest expression of underlying feelings. Also, although it is preferable that the speaker state, and the listener paraphrase feelings, this could be too abstract or seem too daunting on first attempts. It helps if the facilitator continually encourages the two in conflict to look at, and focus on each other, and at times acknowledges their apparent feelings. For example, the facilitator in our example might say, "Nate, you are looking towards me. You look a little worried and nervous. You need to look at Ed and say your story, not at me. That's right—now you are looking at Ed.")

2. Sit to the side and, in general, *face the listener not the speaker*. If facilitators face the speaker, the speaker will tend to talk to the facilitator, not the listener.

3. Be ready to help the listener if he or she needs it. For example, if the children are working to follow the rules, but can't seem to find a way to phrase a reflection, the facilitator can suggest a phrasing or allow the speaker to re-tell the last thing said.

4. Watch for communication breakdowns and assist the two in conflict to get back on track.

5. Keep the two in conflict on track with gentle but consistent redirection. For example, if the speaker begins to talk to you, point with your hand and eyes back to the listener.

6. Listen for the time when the speaker seems to have finished or said his/her piece. When this seems clear to you, you can make sure the speaker is satisfied the listener has heard and understood by asking.

7. Observe the process of the communication. After the intervention is completed, you may acknowledge and summarize the communication efforts that have occurred and make expressions of empathy or genuine response to either or both involved. Few other comments would be fitting or helpful. Though there may be a temptation to ask questions and offer advice or guidance, it is good to remember that this would mark a shift in responsibility from the children in conflict to the adult outside the conflict. This change of emphasis from child to adult could lead to the children feeling judged and/or disciplined rather than leading to the desired feelings of self-reliance, self-worth, and being understood. Telling children in conflict what to do rarely solves the problem unless the advice has been requested, and even then, the advice giving approach often doesn't get to the heart of the matter—the relationship between the children.

Before examining how this approach unfolds in our actual case example it may be helpful to consider some background information about the two boys in conflict. Ed is somewhat big for his age. He is at least moderately socially successful among his peers. Some children seem to look up to him, perhaps because of his size and because he presents himself as “totally cool” and aloof. He is a fairly good athlete and exhibits some leadership qualities. He sometimes bullies Nate and others more with social exclusion and verbal put-downs than with threats of physical violence. The school counselor knows that Ed has his own insecurities but does not know him to be particularly mean. The counselor understands that Ed sometimes gets caught up in group led errors, such as minor bullying and verbal teasing.

Nate is small for his age, wiry and hyperactive. He can be a good learner and is a member of the school's gifted and talented program. When not excluded from the gifted program for misbehavior, such as excessive talking and other persistent, annoying disruptions, he enjoys learning and class activities. However, Nate is not socially successful and he often plays alone on the playground; he has a hard time

blending in during regular classroom activities such as homeroom and physical education.

In our example, under the tree at Rosedale Elementary, it is Nate who chooses to be speaker first. He begins excitedly, looking toward the school counselor, and talking fast, saying, “Ed ran to get in line for the bus ahead of me, and pushed me to get in *my* seat!” The facilitator gently stops Nate to assert a rule. Since Nate is telling his side of the story to Ed, the school counselor says, “Look at Ed. Tell Ed. Tell Ed what you saw happening.”

Nate begins again, “Ed, you got in line ahead of me and took *my* seat, then you and the other kids were talking about me on the bus. When I asked you nicely to stop you kept on, and you ran to get ahead of me when we were getting off the bus.” Although Nate’s story is accusatory of Ed, he has already moderated some of the accusation. Now that he is looking toward, and is speaking directly to Ed, Nate appears tearful, angry and hurt, although he has not overtly expressed these feelings. The counselor realizes that Nate is making more *you* statements than *I* statements. He initially allows this since it is clear that each child will be given a chance to fully express independent perceptions of the conflict.

Before Nate finishes his statements, Ed has stopped listening. He protests to the school counselor that Nate is lying, and tries to begin his version of the story. The school counselor reminds Ed that first he is to summarize Nate’s side of the story, whether he agrees or not, and that once he has done this to Nate’s satisfaction, they will switch roles, and he will get a chance to speak.

When the school counselor prompts Nate to begin again, Nate has moderated the accusing tone of his story. The school counselor also suggests to Nate that he go slower, just telling Ed one part at a time, so Ed can understand and summarize back to him. Nate then tells Ed, “You sat in *my* usual seat, and you and Joseph and Mark were talking about me.” The school counselor notices that Nate is calming and slowing down somewhat, and that his emotional tone seems to be one more of hurt than anger.

Ed responds, “We weren’t talking about you,” seeming to have heard and to be responding to the hurt in Nate’s face when telling this part. The school counselor reminds Ed to summarize Nate’s story. Somewhat reluctantly, Ed tries again. “I sat in *your* usual seat and you thought we were talking about you.”

Nate broadens his story, “I knew you were talking about me because Mark and Joseph were laughing at me in gym, and you never pick me for your kick ball team.” The counselor has observed that not only is Nate not picked for recess kick ball, but usually sits out the game on the periphery, either uninvited or not willing and/or able to invite himself.

Ed responds to Nate, “That’s what made you think we were talking about you, because Mark and Joseph were laughing, and I never pick you.” Ed’s tone is flat, reflecting the fact of Nate’s account.

Having been heard, Nate risks a little more honesty, "It's not fair and everybody should get to play." Nate's tone sounds indignant, but still more hurt than angry.

Ed responds, "You think it's not fair for people to be laughed at in gym, or to not get to play." Ed's tone begins to pick up a little of Nate's hurt.

Nate falls silent. They look at each other for a moment, then Nate looks down and Ed follows by looking down too. Ed nervously picks at the grass. Nate cracks his knuckles.

After a significant silence, the school counselor asks Nate if there is more he wants to add at that time, or if he is satisfied that Ed has heard and understood. Nate responds, "That's it. That's all." He then sits up a little and looks at Ed as if signaling his readiness to listen.

The school counselor tells Ed to tell his side to Nate and then turns to attend to Nate as the new listener. By this time Ed's demeanor has turned from a tough guy, with an I-don't-care attitude, to one of concentrating on his words and seeming to look carefully at Nate. He seems to be seeing Nate as a person with feelings for the first time. He seems to have felt what Nate felt, and to have been moved by it.

Ed begins, "I really wasn't talking about you on the bus." This is the same denial he made before, but now Ed seems to want Nate to believe the truth of it, versus simply denying an untrue accusation with the implication that the mistaken accuser (Nate) is stupid for having thought otherwise.

Nate responds softly and carefully, "You really weren't talking about me..."

Ed continues, "I don't know what's so special about that stupid seat anyway."

"You didn't know that I really wanted it." Nate responds quietly.

After a pause, Ed admits, "I knew you really wanted it."

"You did know." Nate responds again.

The boys keep eye contact for a moment, and then Ed looks down. When he looks back at Nate, he states, "If I pick for kick ball today, I'll pick you."

Looking excited and unbelieving Nate responds, "You'll pick me?"

Again, they hold for a couple of silent seconds, then break eye contact. This time they are silent for a significant time. The school counselor asks Ed, "Is there more you want Nate to understand now?" When he says "no," the counselor asks Nate if he wishes to speak again. When Nate says "no," the counselor notes that their moods seem to have shifted from anger to hopefulness (looking toward Nate) and concern (looking toward Ed). The complete exchange took about 10 minutes.

Ed did pick Nate for his kick ball team at recess. The two seemed to switch from being frequent antagonists to frequent friends, who could talk and laugh, and even joke and tease without going too far. While Nate was never really part of Ed's group of friends, Ed and Nate often played together, occasionally just the two

of them, and were known to get along very well at community activities outside of school.

Discussion

In our experience, empathic communication-focused conflict resolution often has surprising results and on-going benefits such as those experienced by Ed and Nate. Although it doesn't always work in a single application, or work as instantly as in this case example, we find it often works quickly and within two or three interventions. Additionally, although gestures of kindness like Ed's, or quick and easy negotiations often occur after completing communication, we find this step is often not necessary and that for efficiency, empathic communication, not solution, should remain the primary goal in applying this approach to conflict resolution.

Collateral Benefits

We find that empathic communication for conflict resolution often brings benefits beyond an efficacious resolution of the immediate conflict. Through the model of empathic communication for conflict resolution there is a benefit from the listener's role in coming to see the world through other's eyes, and from the speaker's role in experiencing being heard and understood. We find that children who work through the model learn listening and empathy skills that generalize beyond the model and the current situation. Even if emotions are not clearly stated and reflected, children working through the model get a glimpse of the world through others' eyes, and we find they do tend to develop empathy for the person they were in conflict with, and often for others as well. Defining empathy and some of its benefits, Lenaghan (2000) explains that empathy urges the amelioration of others' pain, assists us in discerning acceptable behavior, and is built by imagining another's world. Through the listener role in communication for conflict resolution, the experience of hearing and understanding with empathy seems to reduce the egocentrism that drives conflict, unkindness, and lack of consideration for others.

Complementary to being the empathic listener there is a powerful benefit to being the receiver of empathic understanding. The importance and use of empathy has been well documented for many of life's relationships: in counseling or psychotherapy (e.g., Martin, 1991; Myers, 2000; Patterson, 1984; Rogers, 1980), for use by teachers dealing with students with behavior disorders (Blake & Gardner, 2000), for the success of beginning teachers (Sweeney & Whitworth, 2000), for the closeness and self-efficacy developed in protégé relationships (Clifford, 1999), within and between diverse faith communities (Ausburger, 1986; Everding & Huffaker, 1998; Kinast, 1984; McCarthy, 1992), for use by teachers of multicultural issues (Lo Bainaco, 1999), for use by parents promoting resilience in their children (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001), and for use by writing teachers helping students

overcome anxiety related to writing (Kountz, 1998). In the case of empathic communication for conflict resolution, the collateral benefits of receiving empathy and being heard seem to be a greater sense of self-efficacy and self-reliance for solving conflicts, increased sense of self-respect and respect for others, increased empathy and emotional maturity, and increased skills in developing meaningful friendships.

We believe one of the most important and lasting benefits for children who work through the empathic communication-focused approach to conflict resolution is the increase in self-reliance and empowerment due *to the adult having indicated his or her inability to truly resolve the conflict for them and faith in their ability to do so through empathic communication*. Through this faith, the adult fosters a sense of self-efficacy in the child. By not offering advice and solutions, but instead having the children focus on empathic communication, the counselor/facilitator demonstrates faith in the children's abilities to resolve conflicts through communication. In the case example above, Ed seemed proud to be able to take action to help Nate. Nate seemed pleased to have been heard and understood by someone he may have looked up to. Both seemed to hold themselves in higher esteem for having reached their own resolution with minimal adult advice and guidance.

Additionally, we find communication for conflict resolution enhances relationships between children who are somehow drawn to each other and who, at times, fall into a *bully-victim* cycle. Ironically, friendly relationships can be built from enmity. As in the above case example, we often find that certain pairs of children are repeatedly in conflict with each other. When this occurs there often seems to be an underlying wish for a friendship. Speculating on the case example, Nate may have unknowingly wanted Ed's friendship as he was physically bigger, more powerful within their social structure, and compassionate enough to reach out to him. Complementarily, Ed likely enjoyed Nate's admiration, and his ability to relate to some of his own feelings of need for self-worth, and ability to help Nate fit in.

Special Opportunities in the Elementary School Setting

In schools, counselors have the opportunity to make communication for conflict resolution a part of the overall counseling curriculum and the primary approach for helping children in reaching resolution of conflicts. As in the example above, it can regularly be used in spontaneously erupting conflicts. It can be taught and role-modeled in classroom presentations so that the children are aware of and ready for the approach when conflicts arise. Teachers, administrators, and other caring adults can be taught to facilitate communication for conflict resolution, and may ultimately benefit by learning more effective empathic communication skills for their own use in resolving conflict. There may be potential for application by peer facilitators: We have observed experienced children naturally begin to use elements of the approach without adult guidance. However, we know the urge to switch

from facilitator of communication to mediator/arbitrator of conflict can be quite strong and believe it may overwhelm most child facilitators.

An additional and perhaps crucial opportunity in the elementary school setting is working to prevent tragic shootings like the ones that have frequently recurred in middle and high school settings in the US and abroad (Bowman, 2002; "Teen Gunman," 2002). Many of the adolescents who resorted to murder seemed to have felt themselves as disconnected, bullied (often socially, more than physically), and ostracized (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998; Guetzloe, 1999). Empathic communication for conflict resolution offers an opportunity to build connections where most needed and a method to help ensure that children are not left unheard, discounted, and ostracized.

Concluding Thoughts: Avoiding Common Errors and Missed Opportunities

A problem with most types of conflict resolution is that the parties need to be intrinsically motivated to resolve the conflict. This motivation often does not initially exist because those in conflict seem to see the other as an object, or a set of objectionable characteristics or actions, rather than as a human being with feelings and insecurities, much like themselves. Communication for conflict resolution creates motivation for resolution by giving the children in conflict a way to look into each others eyes, experience each others' world, and feel at least a little of what each other feels. Children are often much more ready than adults to imagine worlds different from their own and when asked to do so can more easily envision another child's reality. When adults focus on the need to think of a solution and give advice, this seems to lead them to doubt children's ability to solve their own problems. When adults generate solutions for children the children lose valuable opportunities not only to efficiently and creatively resolve the conflict at hand, but also to benefit their development toward empathy, self-efficacy, and meaningful friendships.

Many conflict resolution models focus on negotiation, mediation, or arbitration: This assumes that conflict is about an object or resource. We believe that conflict, especially among children, is usually about the person and relationship; that it is driven by feelings pertaining to the relationship with the person. In this article's example, Nate seemed to feel longing for and hurt at a lack of friendly relations with Ed. Thus, Nate steadily generated conflict to gain Ed's attention. Ed probably felt annoyed with this response from Nate and allayed some of his own insecurities by continuing to reject and inflict little hurts on Nate. Empathic communication for conflict resolution emphasized the boys' opportunity to address their conflict with each other, to develop a much more full understanding of each other, to meet each other with only empathy between them, and to rise to a higher level of relating. We wish to encourage other counselors and caring adults to apply this empathic communication-focused approach for conflict resolution and to offer this opportunity to the many children they serve.

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