

# Why Conflict Is Awesome: Six “Noble Truths” to Help You Help Your Child Navigate Social Challenges

by Carrie Spaulding, CPC

“She’s being mean to me!” “He did it on purpose!” Many of us get knots in our stomachs from trying to untie the arguments and tricky social dynamics our children get into!

When the question “How was school today?” brings tears to your child’s eyes, it’s only natural that you want to do whatever you can to help. Chances are, your instinct is to solve the problem, and do it fast—to prevent your child from having to feel any more pain. This is totally normal and understandable! However, if you are always the fixer, your child will learn that others have to fix problems for him or her.

Instead of fostering learned helplessness, help your child develop **empowerment and a sense of agency**. Asking for help is important—but it is just part of what an effective person does to take care of him- or herself. Here are six foundational concepts to help you lean into the powerful growing opportunities presented by social conflicts, and get in a “facilitating” vs. “fixing” state of mind.

## **1. To get good at life, your child has to do the work of life.**

Conflicts can be the best growing opportunities that your child experiences. There are so many fundamental life skills that your child can practice and develop in these tricky social moments! When you are trying to bear the pain of seeing your child in pain, it will help you to set the individual moment in the context of what your child is learning.

You can use this opportunity to help your child develop qualities and skills such as resilience, self-confidence, proactivity, agency (as opposed to victimhood), advocacy, self-efficacy, collaboration, and communication. Knowing that your child is developing these crucial competencies will make it much easier to guide him or her through the conflict.

## **2. Your child is counting on you to hold the big picture.**

Some of the best service you can do for your child is to keep the long view. He or she may not be developmentally ready to see the big picture, and is emotionally “in the box” of the situation. Avoid losing the forest for the trees yourself. Breathe, and remind yourself that this is one of many, many moments in your child’s life. Moreover, it’s moments like this that will prepare your child to be an effective, confident older child and adult.

## **3. Your child is counting on you to hold the belief that everything is going to be okay.**

When you jump in the box with your child, you can’t hold the perspective that they desperately need. If you can internalize and convey a sense that things will work out, your

child will benefit from that calm, positive reassurance—whether or not they can believe you at the time. (In the tough moments, rereading these principles will help you readjust your mindset.)

#### **4. Your language (both oral and body) are so important!!!**

Children are mirrors. If you show panic and helplessness, they will reflect that. While these feelings are normal, modeling them regularly can lead your children to take on a similar mindset. This can escalate a problem—whether it's a significant concern, or a passing incident that may otherwise naturally de-escalate.

Demonstrate the qualities, attitudes, and behaviors you want your child to demonstrate.

*DON'T: catastrophize, demonize, or agonize! DO: Normalize, contextualize, empathize, and verbalize!*

#### **5. When in doubt: model, model, model.**

It's okay and *totally normal* to have emotions like anger, fear, and sadness—and the way you handle them is part of your child's learning, for better or for worse. Think-aloud: "It makes me feel sad to see you feeling sad—and when I'm upset, it helps me to take some deep breaths. I know when I'm calmer I'll be able to help you better." You will be able to ground yourself more intuitively and quickly with practice, but in the meantime, buy yourself some time if you need to! Your child will benefit enormously from learning the self-soothing strategies you model.

#### **6. You must believe that your child can do it, and that there is value in your child doing it.**

Let your child feel your faith in her or him. Even though s/he may need guidance, resources, and a "team" to help, it's vital that your child feel develop a personal sense of agency and empowerment. Knowing that you believe s/he can succeed can pay huge dividends in your child's confidence and, ultimately, ability to do the work of solving problems. Keep at the forefront of your mind that every problem is an opportunity, and your child is likely to rise to the challenge.

As hard as it is to see your child in pain, it's transformative to realize that conflicts offer your child golden growth opportunities. Conflict navigation is not just inevitable; it is fundamental to your child's development. When you feel overwhelmed by the social drama your child brings home, pull out these principles, take the time you need to calm *yourself*, and put on your facilitator hat.

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