Resolving Family Conflicts

Conflict—you’ll find it everywhere from the corporate world to the garden club. Whenever two people come into contact, the potential for conflict arises. It is a normal part of human interaction.

This lesson will help you:

• Understand the nature of conflict;

• Identify your style of dealing with conflict; and

• Learn about a process that can help you effectively resolve conflicts with others.

To prepare for this lesson, take a few minutes and:

• Jot down words that come to mind when you think about conflict; and

• Identify the feelings you can recall about conflict situations you have experienced.

A Closer Look at Conflict

Conflict arises when two people have different values or needs and it appears that satisfying one person’s needs will thwart the needs of the other (example: Do you use this money on a new car or household improvements?). Money may be the scarce resource behind this dilemma, but differing values may be at the source of the conflict.

Take a look at the words that came to mind when you thought about the word “conflict.” Were most of them negative?

A common belief about conflict is that it should be avoided. It is uncomfortable. Have you ever considered that conflicts can have some positive benefits?

The Benefits of Conflict

Conflicts are a fact of life to be dealt with, not a sign of failure. They can provide an opportunity for new learning and an improved relationship. Here are some ways conflict can have positive effects:

• Confrontation in a conflict can lead to change;

• Being aware of conflicts can increase your motivation to do well;

• Conflicts increase awareness of problems that need to be solved;

• Disagreement often causes a decision to be thought through more carefully;
• Conflicts help you understand what you are like under pressure;

• Minor conflicts can defuse potentially large ones; and

• Conflicts can be fun if they’re not taken too seriously.

While it is not suggested that you go out and look for conflicts, it is important to note that a conflict can provide you with some new directions and opportunities. The question is, can you capitalize on the positives and make conflict work for you?

**Differing Values-A Major Source of Conflict**

When two people have different values and beliefs, they may choose different goals or different methods to achieve the same goals. Since each goal requires an investment of time, effort, and some sacrifice, one goal cannot be pursued without sacrificing the other to some extent. When one person perceives a block to achieving his or her goal, conflict occurs.

Recognizing differences in values can bring about an understanding of why certain areas or issues create conflict. The following exercise is designed to help you and your family understand each other a bit better. It is not designed to have you clarify these further for goal-setting purposes, but rather to explore more deeply the values each of you holds. This exercise will be most effective if all family members can complete it individually, then share as a group.

**Values and Goals Activity**

Rate the following 15 goals according to their importance to you. Check in Column A the five you consider most important, in Column B the five next important, and in Column C the five you consider least important.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To live here because it is a satisfying way of life for our family.</td>
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<td>2. To have freedom and independence in work and other activities.</td>
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<td>3. To have economic security.</td>
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<td>4. To have all of the comforts and conveniences of life.</td>
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<td>5. To improve career opportunities before we improve our home.</td>
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<td>6. To have what is needed for our home, even if it means using credit.</td>
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<td>7. To have good health.</td>
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<td>8. To provide good educational opportunities for our children.</td>
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<td>9. To have friends and enjoy good times with them.</td>
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<td>10. To have and enjoy a pleasant home life.</td>
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<td>11. To do things that are new and exciting.</td>
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<td>12. To engage in self-improvement and intellectual activities.</td>
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<td>13. To pursue a favorite hobby or sport such as bicycling, fishing, collecting, etc.</td>
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<td>14. To be influential in guiding policies and activities in our community or the country for worthwhile causes.</td>
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<td>15. To engage in religious activities.</td>
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After you have each rated these goals, take some
time to explore your similarities and differences. How might the differences contribute to creating
conflicts in your family? What similar goals can help
you find agreement in some areas?

**Conflict Issues in Families**

In the preceding material we have noted some of the
basic issues that are sources of conflict in all types of
families; such as, differences in values and goals.

**Managing Conflict**

Now that you know a little more about the nature of
conflict, let’s consider how to manage it effectively.
To begin, it is important to examine the different
ways individuals behave in attempting to resolve
conflicts.

Experience in relating with others shows that every-
one reacts just a little differently when conflicts arise.
That is what makes life interesting. What is your
style of resolving conflict?

Here’s an activity to help you identify your style:

**What’s Your Style? Activity**

**Directions**
Place a check beside the group of characteristics that
best describes you. Do this activity individually. It
need not be shared with others. Be honest with your-
self. Check only one category.

- **A. Do you:**
  - Try to overpower opponents by forcing them to accept your solution to the conflict?
  - Consider your goals of high importance, while the relationship is of minor importance?
  - Seek to achieve goals at all costs?
  - Assume conflicts are settled by one person winning and one person losing?
  - Attempt to win by overpowering or intimidating others?

- **B. Do you:**
  - Feel somewhat concerned with your own goals and your relationships with others?
  - Seek a compromise?

- **C. Do you:**
  - Feel the relationship is of great importance, while your own goals are of little importance?
  - Want to be accepted and liked by others?
  - Think that conflict should be avoided in favor of harmony?
  - Believe that conflicts cannot be discussed without damaging relationships?
  - Give up your goals to preserve the relationship?

- **D. Do you:**
  - Withdraw into a shell to avoid conflicts?
  - Give up personal goals and relationships to avoid conflicts?
  - Avoid conflict issues and people you are in conflict with.
  - Feel it is hopeless to try to resolve conflicts?
  - Believe it is easier to withdraw (physically and psychologically) from a conflict than to face it?

- **E. Do you:**
  - Highly value your own goals and relationships?
  - Seek a solution that achieves both your goals and the goals of the other person?
  - See conflict as improving relationships by reducing tension between two people?

If you chose A, your style could be characterized as a
“shark.” Sharks tend to use force, causing the other side to give in. This creates a winner and a loser. The shark has a deep personal interest in the outcome of the conflict, but does not care much about the needs of others involved.

If you chose B, your style could be characterized as a
“fox.” Foxes use compromise, or bargaining behavior in which each side obtains part of what it wants. An attempt is made to find an answer in which gains and losses of both parties are equal. This style leaves interests and needs of each person only partially satisfied.

If you chose C, your style could be characterized as a “teddy bear.” Teddy bears tend to smooth things
over and fail to confront areas of conflict. This person probably does not have as much personal interest or stake in the conflict, but does care about the needs of others.

If you chose D, your style could be characterized as a “turtle.” Turtles withdraw to avoid the conflict situation entirely. Little attempt is made to satisfy either their personal needs or the needs of others.

If you chose E, your style could be characterized as an “owl.” Wise owls use problem-solving behavior in which both sides meet their needs at a level sufficient to avoid feelings of losing. Everyone wins; conflict is reduced or eliminated. This style requires the full understanding of all viewpoints.

Many people, wanting a more effective style, work toward the owl or problem-solving approach. With this approach, parties in the conflict collaborate in solving the conflict. Collaboration promotes an understanding of everyone’s perspective; increases communication, cooperation, and interdependence; and instills a feeling of integrity, trust, and mutual support.

Most people have a few characteristics of more than one style and may even behave differently depending on the person with whom they may be in conflict. Generally, however one category emerges. However, all styles exist to some degree in most individuals. Recognizing our style and the style of others can result in better understanding and improved communication.

A Step-By-Step Conflict Resolution Strategy

Here is a step-by-step strategy for resolving conflict that uses collaboration.

1. **State the problem**—Ask yourself, “What is the problem?” Be as specific as possible, giving attention to as many facets of the problem as possible. One author said, “A problem well-defined is half solved.” It may also help to separate this problem from your feelings about it. The problem may be the feelings associated with a particular issue, rather than the issue itself. It is also important to avoid offering solutions. Suggesting solutions at this point can cause you to avoid stating what is really bothering you. Other questions you might ask yourself as you define the problem are:

   - Am I stating the real problem?
   - How do I know it is a problem?
   - Is the situation a problem or is it my reaction to the situation that makes it a problem?
   - Is there more than one problem?
   - Why is it a problem?
   - If nothing is done, what will happen? (Is there really a problem?)

2. **Who is involved**—Who is part of the problem and, perhaps, the solution? Who is affected by the problem? List everyone involved and then identify the main characters.

3. **Examine your values related to the problem**—What are some of your needs and concerns related to the issue at hand? Why are they important to you? Which are the most important? This step helps to clarify the problem. It also brings out differences and similarities of interests between the persons involved.

4. **Brainstorm solutions**—Gather as many solutions to the problem as the group can generate. It helps to list them on a large piece of paper. It is important not to judge any potential solutions. Accept all ideas from everyone as worthy of consideration regardless of how ridiculous they may seem.

5. **Rank the solutions**—Using the values identified in Step 3, everyone should rank the various solutions. Those involved should then be able to identify those potential solutions that would be acceptable to all individuals concerned. New solutions may be identified by combining already proposed ideas.

6. **Through consensus, identify a solution**—Everyone should agree on the potential solution. Avoid voting because this sets up a win-lose situation. If agreement on a solution cannot be reached, go back to Step 4 or wait awhile and let feelings settle down before proceeding again. Most problems don’t need to be solved immediately.

7. **Troubleshoot the decision**—Ask questions like, “Why won’t this idea work? What are some of the
obstacles? What could go wrong?” Try to satisfy yourself that in spite of these obstacles, the solution chosen has a reasonable chance of solving the conflict.

Implement your solution to the conflict. It is helpful to think of all solutions as temporary. Be open to going through the process again if it seems that the solution is not working like you thought it would.

**Put the Process into Action**

Like any new skill, **learning collaboration takes practice.** As a family, choose a minor area of conflict to practice the seven steps. Here are some additional suggestions to increase your chances of success.

- As a family, agree that now is a good time to attempt to resolve the conflict. Use “prime time” when energy is high and motivation is positive. Avoid attempts to resolve conflicts when one member is angry or tired.

- Stay in the present. Do not engage in coercion or fault-finding from the past.

- There must be an underlying attitude of respect, caring, forgiveness, and goodwill.

- Provide “face-saving” mechanisms. Don’t corner the other person. Allow a “time out” if emotion gets too high. Set a time to resume again.

**A conflict has been helpful if:**

- You are able to work better with others after the conflict;

- You and the others involved feel better about each other after the conflict;

- You and the others are satisfied with the results of the conflict;

- Your ability to resolve future conflicts with others has been enhanced;

- You know more about the issue under discussion; and

- You feel your point of view has been heard.

**A Final Word**

This process has been discussed as a way for many families to approach conflict creatively. It does not offer specific answers but rather has suggested a process by which families can work through their conflicts. Understanding more about family stress and ways families can cope with it is the focus of Lesson 5.
Study Questions

Lesson 4
Resolving Family Conflicts

1. Some people feel that compromise is an effective method for dealing with conflict. Why might collaboration be a more effective method?

2. A friend has recently mentioned to you that he tries to avoid conflict at all times. What might you say to him about conflict?

3. What is at the root of all conflict?

4. Stating the problem (Step 1 in the conflict resolution process) is crucial to the success of the process. What are some questions you can ask to help clarify the problem?
Study Answers

Lesson 4
Resolving Family Conflicts

1. Although compromise can be useful, it can also build frustration and mistrust. Parties involved may become frustrated when their needs are only partially met. With collaboration, openness and honesty are encouraged. Because this approach seeks to meet everyone’s needs, information is shared freely and without suspicion. Power is shared equally.

2. Although we think of conflict as negative, there can be some positive aspects of conflict. For example, conflict can lead to change and motivate you to do your best. It can also cause a decision to be thought out more carefully. Life could be pretty boring without some conflict.

3. Conflict between people develops when there is a struggle over values or poor communication. When two people have different values or goals and it is perceived that satisfying one person’s needs will directly thwart the other person from meeting his or her needs, conflict develops.

4. What will happen if I don’t deal with this? Is the situation a problem, or is it my reaction to the situation? How do I know it’s a problem? Why is it a problem?
Additional Resources

Stress Management

Stress Management
http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/famlf2/MF776.PDF

Celebrate Your Family
http://www.extension.umn.edu/info-u/families/BE908.html

Childhood Stress
http://extensionenespanol.net/tmmpdfs/2-4139011-E2954.pdf

Children, Stress and Disaster
http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5152.html

Holiday Stress

Stress and Humor

Families and Young Children
http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-fact/5000/5169.html

Grandparents and Stress
http://ohioline.osu.edu/ss-fact/0156.html

Fostering Resilience in Children
http://ohioline.osu.edu/b875/b875_3.html

Caregiver Stress
http://ohioline.osu.edu/ss-fact/0118.html

Coping Skills
http://www.family.samhsa.gov/get/copingskills.aspx

Helping Children Cope

National Mental Health Association
http://www.nmha.org

National Institute of Mental Health

Staying Healthy in Stressful Times
http://www.extension.uiuc.edu/ruralroute/stayinghealthy.pdf

Farm Stress Management Plan

Time Management—Making the Most of a Limited Resource:
http://www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/Publications/PDFs/FS671.pdf

Transitions and Changes
http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/10214.html

Transitions and Changes
http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/10215.html

Supporting Families Following a Disaster:
http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/supporting_families/


This lesson was revised and reviewed in 2009 by Clemson University Professors, Deborah J. Thomason, Ed.D., CFLE and Pamela A. Havice Ph.D. Original lessons were adapted from the “Stress on the Farm Home Study Course”, developed by Iowa State Cooperative Extension and the “Farm Family Stress” series developed by Michigan State Cooperative Extension Service.

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