

# GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell



**Kelly**, a new student teacher, describes a conflict that occurred in a class of three- to five-year-olds:

I had just finished reading a book to Allie. She set it on the table to hear me read another book. Charmaine came up and took the book that Allie and I had just put down.

**Allie:** Charmaine, NO! Give me that back. (*Allie takes the book from Charmaine's hands.*)

**Charmaine** (*screaming and crying*): I wanted to look at that! (*Allie holds the book tight, glares at the smaller girl, and with her other arm pushes Charmaine away.*)

**Kelly** (*taking one girl on either side of me, with my arms around both of them*): Hey, girls, I think we need to work this out, but first we need to cool down a bit. Can you each take three big breaths? (*Allie shakes her head and turns her back to me.*) Okay, Allie, you can cool down on your own however you want. (*Charmaine and I count out three big breaths.*) Are you ready to talk yet, Allie?

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Thanks to Kelly Grunenwald for contributing the anecdote. Kelly will receive a BS in early childhood education in May.

Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.

**Allie:** Yes. (*She turns back toward us.*)

**Kelly:** Allie, what happened?

**Allie:** I was reading that book and . . .

**Charmaine:** You were not. I got it from the table.

**Kelly:** Charmaine, you will have your turn too, but right now we are listening to Allie.

**Allie:** Yeah, so I was reading the book, and Charmaine came over and took it from me.

**Kelly:** Okay, are you done now?

**Allie:** Yes.

**Kelly:** Charmaine, what do you think happened?

**Charmaine:** Allie was done with the book. I was going to read it.

**Kelly:** So Allie thought she was still using the book, and Charmaine thought she was done. Is that right? (*Both girls nod.*) How do you think we can solve this problem?

**Charmaine:** Maybe Allie can just give me the book.

**Kelly:** Would that work for both of you?

**Allie:** No, I am not done with it yet. Let me read it one more time.

**Kelly:** One more time and then you will give it to Charmaine? Charmaine, what do you think of that?

**Charmaine** (*shrugs shoulders*): Okay.

**Kelly:** Thank you, Charmaine. I like how you both solved the problem together. (*Charmaine gets up to play with other toys, and Allie returns to my lap with the book.*) Allie, you made me sad when you took the book away from Charmaine like that. What else could you have done instead of pulling and pushing?

**Allie:** Asked her for it?

**Kelly:** I think that sounds like a good idea. How could you have asked?

**Allie:** Charmaine, I am not done yet. Give it back to me now!

**Kelly:** Could you add a friendly word on the end?

**Allie** (*grins*): Please.

**Kelly:** You got it! (*I leave to check on another group, and I see Allie briefly look at the book, then get up and give it to Charmaine.*)

**Allie:** Here.

**Charmaine:** Thanks.

Allie then went to a different center and continued playing.

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**CONFLICTS ARE EXPRESSED DISAGREEMENTS BETWEEN PEOPLE.** Conflicts happen all the time in early childhood classrooms—and just about everywhere else in life! In my view, *conflict management* includes the ability to

- prevent conflicts from becoming too serious to resolve easily and
- resolve conflicts peaceably no matter how serious they get.

When a third person assists others in resolving a conflict, this is *conflict mediation*, and it is the gold standard of guidance interventions.

Teaching through conflict mediation takes time and effort. If teachers commit to this intervention, they are saying children's social-emotional learning needs to be part of the curriculum. In this sense, conflict mediation is central to developmentally appropriate practice: you can't have one without the other. The real-life benefit of using conflict mediation is that children learn to manage conflicts by talking things through themselves.

In one of her first efforts at conflict mediation, Kelly used a five-step process I call the "five finger formula." She used it well. Let's look at how:

### 1. Thumb: Cool everyone down.

Kelly suggested each child take three deep breaths. Allie said no, and Kelly perceptively accepted this decision in order to keep the cool-down process going (Why start a second conflict?). No one can negotiate when they are upset. Calming all parties is essential.

### 2. Pointer: Agree about what the problem is.

Significantly, Kelly stayed neutral during this step. Without taking sides or moralizing, she got the children to take turns talking and to agree: "Allie, you thought . . . and Charmaine, you thought . . . Is that right?" (Both girls nod.)

### 3. Tall Guy: Brainstorm possible solutions.

Kelly got the children to make suggestions, cross-checking with each child. She did not side with either or impose a solution on both. She quietly facilitated. This is called *low-level mediation*. With children who are younger or who have strong unmet needs, the teacher becomes a more active "word coach." This

is called *high-level mediation*. Always, our goal is to move the children toward negotiating for themselves.

### 4. Ringer: Agree on a solution.

In conflict mediation, the teacher never knows what the outcome will be and does not impose one. This lack of control over the outcome makes conflict mediation difficult for some teachers. What Kelly did was control the *process*. This is where the real leadership comes in.

### 5. Pinky: Facilitate the solution.

Notice two things about the resolution. First, after each child had her say, each compromised a little. Charmaine let Allie have "one more time." Allie gave the book to Charmaine without re-reading it. Charmaine said, "Thanks."

Second, it was after the conflict was resolved and Charmaine walked away, and not during the mediation, that Kelly had a *guidance talk* with Allie. A guidance talk is a conversation about what a child could do differently next time to manage a conflict more peaceably. After

Allie felt success through the mediation, she was willing to have the guidance talk. (Sometimes the teacher uses a guidance talk with *both children*, together or separately, but always at the end of the mediation.)

The students in Kelly's college class all do papers on conflict mediation. Some may blend the steps and not use them perfectly, but almost all get mediation to work—even on the first try or two, even when the students themselves are second-language learners. An academic degree is not necessary to use this guidance tool. How do teachers know when mediation works? The children at least go along with the solution—as in the anecdote—and very often end up playing together as though a conflict never occurred. (I'll bet you've seen this happen.)

When adults use conflict mediation successfully, they avoid reinforcing in children the roles of bully and victim; these roles perpetuate unhealthy self-images, additional conflicts, and negative classroom dynamics. Instead, the adults sustain an encouraging classroom in which *all* children are helped to feel they are worthy, contributing members. Children learn to negotiate their conflicts peaceably, and social-emotional intelligences develop and thrive.

### To increase your knowledge:

Look up these two books.  
Evans, B. 2002. *You Can't Come to My Birthday Party: Conflict Resolution with Young Children*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope.  
Wichert, S. 1989. *Keeping the Peace: Practicing Cooperation and Conflict Resolution with Preschoolers*. Philadelphia, PA: New Society.

Many other fine books and articles on conflict management and peace education are out there. Locate one you like and share it with others.

### A step you can take:

Get together with other teachers or caregivers, post the five steps as a reminder, and go for it! Mediation does not have to be perfect to work, but it must be used consistently to make a difference in how the children in your group relate to others.

## Avoiding Potholes on the Way to Successful Mediation

1. Calm everyone first, including yourself. One legitimate use of "separation" (*not* time-out) is to help children cool down so you can use guidance with them.
2. Prevent yourself from siding with either child or telling them what they "did wrong." Moralizing during mediation kills the willingness to negotiate. Delay your own interpretations until a guidance talk at step five, even though this is hard.
3. Wait for the children to suggest solutions. If your patience wears out, suggest but do not impose. Asking "Will this work for both of you?" allows children to be the participants they have to be if they are going to learn to negotiate. Remember, when the children agree, go with their solution even if it doesn't fully meet your own interpretation of justice.
4. Help children learn how to reconcile after successful mediation. Forced apologies are not appropriate because they leave children (like all of us) with unresolved conflicted emotions. Instead, ask, "How can you help [the other child] to feel better?" If the child is not ready, suggest: "That's okay, maybe you can think of something later." (Most children forgive more easily than many of us adults.)
5. Monitor activity after the mediation. So children know the process matters, acknowledge their accomplishment and compliment reconciling behaviors.

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