



Resolving Conflicts with Your Children



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Editor's Note: This ebook originally was developed to promote interest in a four-year project begun by child and adolescent psychologist, **Dr. James Sutton**. That project was completed in the form of a book published in 2012, *The Changing Behavior Book: A Fresh Approach to the Difficult Child* (<http://www.thechangingbehaviorbook.com>). The ebook you are reading is chapter twenty-three of that book.

Response to this ebook has been quite encouraging. One grandmother called Dr. Sutton sharing how she used the ten steps to address conflict she was having in raising her adolescent granddaughter. "It was BETTER than six months of counseling," she exclaimed.

As long as there are parents and children, or teachers and students, there will be conflict. It's a component of relationships from time to time.

Conflict isn't always a bad thing; sometimes it's necessary. Otherwise, all children would grow up so self-centered and egotistical they wouldn't be able even to stand themselves.

No, we don't want to eliminate conflict. What we want to eliminate is the damage of mismanaged conflict.

Conflict and Survival

Conflict occurs when each person in the conflict wants to win. As a concept, the need to win began as a biological imperative. Early on, winning was more than a lofty goal or a good idea.

When early man crawled out of his cave each morning, he could not afford to lose even once. Survival depended on it, and you'd better believe it was etched on every fiber in the gene pool.

Enter the victim: But, even then, winning produced an interesting by-product: a victim. Victims back then, however, weren't much of a problem because they didn't last long. They were eaten quickly. The victim problem was absorbed in the process of survival. If you were still alive at the end of the day, you *were* the winner. Keeping score was not difficult.

This isn't true today, is it? Victims can hang around for decades, giving their hurt, pain, embarrassment, and frustration years to boil and fester. The accumulation of negative experiences and bad memories handicaps these folks in life and steals their joy. The victim issue is, in my opinion, the absolute root of much misery, disease, divorce, and even death in our world today.

Change is needed: Unfortunately, typical avenues for helping victimized individuals get past life-limiting issues have, on balance, been less than successful. This is nothing new; we've known it for years. What is new, at least to me, is a change in our perception of the problem.

Can a change in perception really make a difference? It can make *all* the difference.

Epiphany

Have you ever had an epiphany, an instant when everything became crystal-clear to you? I'm talking about an instant when answers to years of questions fell squarely into your lap unannounced? This is precisely what happened to me on a trip to California a few summers back. Someone I didn't know showed me how to connect the dots on a picture that to me had always been incomplete. It was a picture of the potential to heal hurting young people at a level of almost 100%.

As the picture and how to share it with others became clear to me, I could hardly wait to get back home and dive head-first into this new and invigorating project. It is, without question, the most meaningful thing I have written in 30 years. What you are reading now is but a small part of the larger work.

Looking in a different place: My summer epiphany might have been a miracle to me only, but it did cause me to look at all the well-intending mistakes I made in the past as an educator, psychologist and, yes, as a father. What I learned caused me to stop looking out *there* for the problem, but rather to look *inside* for the solution.

That's a pretty radical approach, huh? Well, it works. Consider how this approach works with marvelous consistency in one of the most solid models of healing you'll ever find: the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

A different approach to healing: Consider the work of Hawaiian psychologist, Dr. Ihaleakala Hew Len. In the late 1980s he put into motion the healing of a whole ward of criminally insane patients, not by working on them, but by working on himself.

Was he successful? From what I have learned, all the patients except two were healed to the point the ward was closed.

On the surface this story seems difficult to believe, but consider how this approach really isn't that farfetched at all. Whenever we change, and I'm talking about life-altering, cleansing change, others will change also. They *must* change; they cannot remain the same.

Demolition Derby

When I was a kid, Dad and my uncle Ray loved to go to the stock car races. Since I was the oldest grandchild by several years, I had the honor of tagging along.

These were dirt-track events. This meant that, if you sat close to the track, some of that dirt would end up on *you*! That was pretty cool stuff for this nine-year-old.

My favorite event was the Demolition Derby. (They still have them today, usually as a stand-alone event at county fairs.) Contestants would pile into junker cars and make it their goal to be the last car still capable of moving.

It was a *hoot!* Cars would go ramming into one another, each one trying to deliver a blow that would disable the other (the radiator was the bull's-eye). It was conflict on a grand scale.

Or was it? When the Demolition Derby was over, all the drivers would pile into the one car still running and head for the local watering hole for a few beers and a bunch of stories.

It wasn't conflict; it was entertainment. And everyone knew it. In real life, however, conflict can put human beings out of commission *permanently*.

Coercion and Conflict

A person's need to win can include the need to cajole, coerce, or otherwise overpower anyone or anything in their way. In fact, the coercive component of conflict is so predictable in its course that Dr. Gerald Patterson of the University of Oregon has a name for it: The Coercive Process. (I've never met Dr. Patterson, but I did spend a day with Dr. Jeremy Shapiro, a clinical psychologist with Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Dr. Shapiro is quite knowledgeable of Dr. Patterson's work.)

Looped conflict: The Coercive Process, sometimes called The Coercive Loop, is operating whenever two individuals become so disagreeable with one another that the response of one adds fuel and more negativity to the response of the other. From there it escalates until one of them either capitulates or shoves the other into compliance using force. It's also possible a bright and difficult youngster skillfully can use the power of the loop to *avoid* complying.

Here's an example of a coercive process involving a married couple.

Wife: Tell me, why are you so mean and hateful all the time? I'd like to know.

Husband: Well, I reckon anyone married to you would turn out mean and hateful sooner or later.

The good news about this little scenario is that both of them are adults (well, sort of), fairly capable of taking care of themselves in the conflict.

A gut-level solution: I knew of a couple who would get into massive conflicts on a regular basis. The husband developed a stress-related colon condition which, when in episode, required hospitalization and a *lot* of expense. It got to the point where he only had look to like he was getting sick during an argument and the wife would shut down completely. He controlled it all, with his *gut*!

But what happens when the coercive process starts boiling between a frustrated adult and an irresponsible youngster? Exactly how does a kid manage to hold his own against the size, power, resources, and demands of the adult?

He doesn't, not directly anyway. That would be way too dangerous and risky. But the youngster gets in his shots in other ways: passive-aggressive behavior, forgetfulness, "silent" oppositionality and defiance, and the big one of noncompliance.

A kid with a plan: I knew a pre-teen who would poop his pants whenever his stepmother would push a confrontation into painful conflict. Although that behavior sent her into orbit, it also brought the discussion to a rapid close! It was a perfect example of a full-blown coercive loop the kid learned to control to perfection. The boy's behavior was hard on the relationship, but it was highly effective in closing a conflict quickly.

Any variety of these reactive behaviors brought youngsters to my office. They were precisely the reason why subsequent conflict happened and kept on happening. It became a vicious cycle, a cycle that, too often, the youngster had learned to control.

Resolving Conflict

The secret to resolving negative conflict with a youngster is to remove coercive elements and manage it as a problem-solving discussion. It's also important to understand that *resolving* the conflict is better than *winning* the conflict because there doesn't have to be a loser, a victim. We're going to cover the process of this confrontation step-by-step. (I'm not wild about describing this process as "confrontation," but it's the closest word that fits.)

The steps for resolving conflict require the adult and the youngster to be rational, focused, and comfortable enough to participate. These steps are intended to be supportive and noncoercive as solutions to problems are sought.

1. *Approach the situation as if every problem was YOUR fault.* Although that might not be the case, coming to the confrontation from a position of 100% responsibility can change you in a way that is not only positive, but cleansing and effective beyond belief. At the very least, taking responsibility manages *your* anger and frustration. It positions you as a player in the discussion rather than an accuser and, perhaps for the first time, it will open the ears and the mind of the youngster. Remember Dr. Hew Len's success with the criminally insane patients? This is how he approached his work with them.

Considering the severity of his patients, what else *could* he change other than himself? Criminally insane patients aren't exactly adept at managing a conversation or a relationship. In comparison, any work we would do with reasonably intact children and adolescents ought to be a dream.

(If this approach bothers you a bit, congratulations. You're normal; it bothered me, too. Just keep in mind that, as the youngster later offers you his take on the problems at hand and suggests solutions, he will then become responsible for acting on the solutions *he* suggests.)

2. *Remember, your children and students DON'T hate you.* Kids can and will say some terrible and cutting things when they are upset, but they rarely mean them with permanence.

In all my years of working with young people and their families, I've encountered less than a handful of youngsters who didn't genuinely care about their relationships with parents and teachers. Anger and frustration can cloud things a lot but, beneath it all, an element of caring is almost always there.

3. *Slow down, a LOT.* Speed is the enemy of reason and effective, empowered solutions. If you have to do anything quickly, the results often will be less than optimal. If this discussion, this positive confrontation, is to be effective, it can't be rushed. The path to authentic healing is a *slow* path. (With our high-octane lifestyles, slowing down just might be one of the biggest challenges to the whole intervention process.)

4. *Be sensitive to the "where" of the confrontation.* Physical locations often arouse rough and troubling memories of what happened earlier in that place. It can be a mental and an emotional obstacle for both of you. It's important to move the confrontation to a more neutral location, a place not associated with any prior difficulty.

5. *Be physically and emotionally relaxed as you open the confrontation.* Body language is a powerful transmitter of what's coming. Keep it conversational and noncoercive.

I've had success talking with youngsters as we took a short walk. There's something about movement that makes the process work better. If you're seeing the child or adolescent at school, however, confidentiality might limit your mobility.

6. *Open the confrontation with an objective statement of fact.* Don't infer anything that can't be observed or documented. Describing the child's behavior should be like describing a photograph or a video. This is so critical because, if the confrontation includes too much inferred content ("You just don't care about doing *anything* to help out around this house"), you'll probably lose the youngster. Besides, you don't really know what's going on inside her head, anyway.

Although the facts are confrontational, they are, after all, still the facts. Here's an opener coming from a father to a son:

Todd, two weeks ago you told me that every Wednesday morning before you left for school, you'd bring the garbage bin around to the front so it could be emptied. I checked the bin when I came in this afternoon. It's still in the back, and it's full.

Todd might have some reasons why the garbage wasn't taken around front that morning, but he'd have a hard time arguing the location and the state of the bin at that moment. Just focus on the facts (like Sergeant Joe Friday did in every episode of the old TV series, *Dragnet*).

You can even use this approach to confront an earlier outburst from the youngster. Remember to keep it descriptive and factual. Here a mother speaks to her daughter:

Marcy, when you left for school this morning you screamed, "I wish you weren't my mother," and slammed the door behind you.

At this point it's possible that one or both of these youngsters might attempt to offer an apology or even go and fix the problem right then. It's important, however, to redirect them back to the discussion so there won't be any interruption in the steps.

A teacher might state a positive confrontation like this. Notice how it remains descriptive and factual, as if the teacher is narrating a video of the youngster's behavior.

John, I have noticed that when I give out an assignment, you frown and look upset. I've also noticed those assignments don't get finished and turned in.

7. *State your vulnerability.* This step might seem a bit surprising, but the admission of vulnerability is considered a prized commodity in good, working relationships. (Besides, if we get upset at the child, become red in the face, and start raising our voices, that's *also* an expression of vulnerability, but it's the sort of expression that can reinforce or pay off the behaviors we *don't* want.) An appropriate expression of

vulnerability from the adult is an indirect appeal to the youngster to fix the problem and help restore the relationship.

Vulnerability might be stated in the following ways, using the same scenarios as before. Notice how these statements are meant to pull the child into a position of responsibility without sounding too much like a lecture.

(Dad speaking to Todd) *It concerns me that we have to keep all that garbage in our back yard for another week, while we keep adding to it. It's unhealthy for our family, Todd, and that scares me some.*

(Mom to Marcy) *I was hurt by what you said, Marcy. There is no job or role I have that means more to me than being your mother.*

(Teacher to John) *It frustrates me, John, when I see a student of mine get further and further behind. It concerns me a lot.*

8. *Probe for the problem.* In this phase of the confrontation, we ask the youngster for her take on the issue or problem that has been described.

This can require patience, as a first answer might be, "I don't know." (A counselor friend of mine was fond of saying at this point, "Yes, but if you *did* know, what would the answer be?")

If little or nothing comes from the youngster, suggest that you'll give her some time to think it over while you're still sitting with her. If the wait and the silence start to become uncomfortable, that's good. There's a good chance you'll get an answer of some kind.

If the youngster still can't come up with anything, suggest the need to schedule another meeting. It's amazing how insight suddenly arrives to a youngster when she's faced with the possibility of *another* meeting.

It is critical, of course, to probe for the problem without being overly accusatory in the process, or by asking questions that "lead" the youngster to the problem and solution *you* want to address. (A youngster might agree that your suggested problem is the issue, but if she really doesn't believe it, she won't put much effort into the solution.)

Here's some sample dialog using our three examples.

(Dad to Todd) *What's the problem here, Todd, and how can we fix it? I REALLY want to know.*

(Mom to Marcy) *Help me understand. What was that about? Marcy, I don't want for either of us to go through that again. What do you suggest we do?*

(Teacher to John) *John, what do you see as the problem here? How can we work this out so you don't fail this class?*

9. *Extinguish the problem.* This happens in two ways. First of all, problems are probed so they *can* be fixed. Start by working with the information the youngster gives you. Since it's his view, he will be more willing to put effort and energy into resolving it. You both might realize it's not workable, but there's a decent chance that a joint plan can be developed. Make the solving of the problem or issue as win/win as you can, and comment on the effort the youngster puts into working on it. (After all, he *wants* you to notice.)

By way of example, let's say that Todd tells Dad that he needs help remembering about trash day. Perhaps they come up with a cue, a digital photo of the garbage bin. Dad hands his son the picture the evening before (a nonverbal reminder), and Todd puts the photo on top of his school books or in some other conspicuous place. (Haven't we all needed a "reminder" once in awhile?)

Be aware that the youngster might come up with a problem that really isn't *the* problem. It might be a trial balloon. This could be due to a certain amount of fear and apprehension, or it could be a test, a way to see just how committed and authentic you are in helping to resolve the issue. That leads to a follow-up question, the second way to extinguish problems:

Great; that's definitely something we can work on. Tell me, is there anything else? Anything at all? Are we good? Are there any other issues or problems that you can think of?

Questions delivered to extinguish the problems can be quite therapeutic because the *real* problem often bubbles to the surface after the first one is shared and discussed successfully. When the youngster says there are no other problems, he's expected to commit to fixing the ones he has mentioned.

(I worked with a 14-year-old girl who had been placed in a group home because her mother had a multitude of issues in her life, including cancer. I visited with the girl and asked her if she had any problems she needed to work on. "No, I don't," was her terse, rather indignant, response.

When our visit was over she asked me if she could go home. "Well, your mom's not ready for you to come home just yet," I explained. "She's dealing with a lot of issues right now."

"Well, I have issues, too!" the girl screamed at me. I reminded her that, just a few minutes earlier, she had told me she had no issues or problems needing attention. I then asked her which statement was true. Challenged to select either "A" or "B," she took "C" when she said, "Why are you being so MEAN to me?")

Work on any other issues or problems that surface, or set a time to do so. It wouldn't be a bad idea to have a quick conference later to check on the progress and implement appropriate changes to the plan.

10. *Thank the youngster.* This one is very important. When closing this confrontation, express your appreciation to the youngster for her efforts in helping you with the issues identified. A short follow-up note would be a great idea, also.

Headings-only List

It might help to look at the ten steps written as a headings-only list. Once you understand all the components of each step, just a look at the heading should help you stay on task and not miss any steps.

1. Approach the situation as if every problem was *your* fault.
2. Remember, your children and students *don't* hate you.
3. Slow down, a *lot*.
4. Be sensitive to the "where" of the confrontation.
5. Be physically and emotionally relaxed as you open the confrontation.
6. Open the confrontation with an objective statement of fact.
7. State your vulnerability.

8. Probe for the problem.
9. Extinguish the problem.
10. Thank the youngster.

Two Other Types of Confrontation

Here is a short description of two more confrontation approaches to resolving conflict.

Aha! One intervention, I call it the Aha! Confrontation, is great to use when a child or adolescent demonstrates multiple, almost identical issues of noncompliance, such as chronic bouts of missing or incomplete school work or repeated discipline referrals. I've been sharing it with teachers and school administrators for years.

The goal here is to focus more on the solution rather than the confrontation. In fact, and this is consistent with the ten steps just covered, the ultimate goal is to have the youngster offer solutions to his own behavior.

To do this, you first make the problem tangible, something the child can actually see and touch, such as missing assignments or discipline referrals spread out on a table. You spontaneously and gently interpret the defiance and pull the youngster in as a player in resolving the problem.

Another primary aim of the Aha! Confrontation is to make it appear completely spontaneous, as if it is happening in the moment. If it looks authentic and unscripted to the youngster, he's more apt to buy into it.

Good faith: The other type of confrontation is called the Good Faith Confrontation. This approach is designed specifically for parents. It takes a tremendous amount of vulnerability and requires parents to buy into their part of the problem and act on it vigorously and quickly, whenever indicated, as an example of assuming responsibility for one's actions.

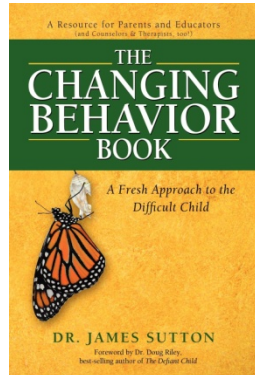
When parents actively work on their part of the problem, it makes it more difficult for the child to do nothing in return. It cuts into their excuses dramatically. It's this specific action that lays the foundation for success through honest interaction and sharing. This approach, however, can require incredible patience on the part of the parents, something that can pay off powerfully.

Improvement with this intervention can be measured in minutes, not weeks. There is a downside, however: Many folks aren't ready for this deep an intervention because of the vulnerability and patience it requires. Also, it's not an appropriate strategy for every situation (especially if the youngster is fearful of the parents).

What Needs to Happen?

Read and re-read the ten steps. Practice them a few times before you sit down with the youngster. Work on being relaxed and cordial as you invite her to work with you on solving specific problems. If you get stuck, or feel like you are becoming frustrated, shut it down quietly and try again at another time.

I wish you success, but I wish you much more than that. I wish you a life-lifting epiphany that will positively transform you and the young people in your life. –JDS



To learn more about *The Changing Behavior Book*, including a chapter-by-chapter description, a number of reviews, and ordering information go to: <http://www.thechangingbehaviorbook.com>.

For valuable insights and ideas on how to best foster positive psychological, emotional and behavioral health in young people today, bookmark *The Changing Behavior Network* by going to: <http://www.thechangingbehaviornetwork.com>.

On *The Changing Behavior Network*, your host, **Dr. James Sutton**, psychologist and former teacher, combines his expertise with other specialists in sharing excellent information and interventions for parents, teachers, counselors and other child-service professionals. The site also features radio-style audio interviews with guest experts and authors. You can even WIN their books!

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