

# I. STUDIA I ROZPRAWY

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## FOSTERING A “CULTURE OF CONFLICT” AMONG CHILDREN

ABSTRACT. Cywińska Małgorzata, *Fostering a “Culture of Conflict” among Children* [Rozwijanie „kultury konfliktu” wśród dzieci]. Studia Edukacyjne no. 72, 2024, Poznań 2024, pp. 7-17. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 1233-6688. Submitted: 20.02.2024. Accepted: 15.03.2024. DOI: 10.14746/se.2024.72.1

This article aims to explore the constructive resolution of interpersonal conflicts, with a particular focus on childhood. It highlights the necessity for “conflict education” and the cultivation of a “culture of conflict” from early stages of life, emphasizing the importance of developing appropriate competencies during childhood for harmoniously resolving both personal and interpersonal conflicts. These are especially emotional-social and cognitive skills as well as problem-solving abilities. Well-designed programs for fostering constructive conflict resolution among children, along with specific methods and heuristic techniques, facilitate the development of a range of these competencies in children.

**Key words:** interpersonal conflicts, constructive conflict resolution programs for children, problem-solving, emotional-social competence, cognitive competence, development of “conflict culture” in childhood environment

### Introduction

Delving into the etymology of the term “conflict,” derived from the Latin *conflictus* meaning clash, it proves insightful to heed the words of Empedocles, the ancient Greek scholar and philosopher, who elucidated that the fundamental forces of our existence, love and discord, “have been (...) before and will be, and never, it seems, will time be boundlessly free of this pair” (Tatarkiewicz, 1990, p. 42). These words evoke notions of variability, divergence, and contradiction, leading one to infer that conflicts are a natural and

inevitable aspect of human life. This inevitability stems from the disparities between individuals – the clash and collision of their diverse aspirations, interests, values, and perspectives.

However, as Zygmunt Mysłakowski aptly stated, “what is undesirable is not the mere existence of differing opinions among people; it is undesirable when individuals fail to navigate these differences effectively” (Mysłakowski, 1967, p. 62). Saying this, Mysłakowski emphasized the crucial educational imperative of creatively and constructively leveraging these differences within interpersonal interactions or group dynamics. Indeed, differences profoundly enrich our existence, serving as a testament to authenticity and individuality. When these disparities are acknowledged, the subjectivity of relationships is reflected, demonstrating respect for others while bolstering their self-esteem. In the context of children, it further validates their unique developmental paths (Cywińska, 2004a, pp. 10-12).

It is paramount that these identified differences not only contribute to the uniqueness of individuals but also characterize the era in which we live. They reflect the diversity, fluidity, and ambiguity of our times, showcasing various paradigms that interpret the world differently, the absence of a universally accepted truth, the multitude of discourses, and, propelled by globalization processes, the clash of diverse cultures, customs, traditions, lifestyles, and educational, axiological, political, and economic pluralism. Consequently, it can be argued that modernity is defined by the concept of “difference” (Śliwowski, 2004, pp. 357-386; Melosik, 2018, pp. 11-27).

Social conflicts and interpersonal conflicts are often viewed negatively, primarily seen as sources of tension, unrest, and aggression, imbued with frustration and strong negative emotions that lead to distress and foster antagonism, hostility, and destruction. However, it is crucial to recognize that the etymology of the word *conflict*, derived from the Latin *confligere* and *conflictatio*, meaning to collide, dispute, or struggle, indicates that conflict can have not only a destructive, but also an integrative (Białyszewski, 1983, pp. 47-51) and developmental impact on the individual. Such conflicts entail a subjective and dialogical approach, fostering constructive resolutions to contentious issues and the development of solutions that satisfy both parties. This approach ensures that there are no losers or defeated individuals, as the needs and aspirations of all parties involved are taken into account. This approach embodies a win-win solution, representing the essence of “conflict education” and development of the “culture of conflict” (Ryborz, 1991, pp. 207-208; Cywińska, 2004b, pp. 177-187).

Conflicts of a constructive nature facilitate a deeper understanding of the parties involved, their expectations, needs, and emotions. They enhance individuals’ ability to communicate effectively, promote introspection regard-

ing their actions, and encourage the exploration of new problem-solving approaches. As a result of mutually beneficial resolutions of contentious issues, constructive conflicts serve as a source of positive stress, known as eustress, which encompasses pleasant sensations of joy, fulfillment, and motivation towards life achievements. Achieving constructive dispute resolution demands the capacity to creatively manage differences among individuals and social groups. It necessitates the collaborative effort of both parties to identify the problem, explore various potential solutions, subject them to critical evaluation, and determine a win-win outcome (Gordon, 2000, pp. 242-249). It also requires possessing knowledge about the dynamics of the conflict process and the ability to effectively address it.

Hence, the imperative of the contemporary era is to foster "conflict education" and cultivate a "culture of conflict" from the earliest stages of an individual's life. Research indicates that conflicts encountered in adulthood often mirror those experienced in childhood (Folger, Poole, Stutman, 2003, p. 497), underscoring the significance of early experiences in shaping future responses to challenging situations. Thus, it is crucial to cultivate appropriate competencies during childhood for effectively managing both personal and interpersonal conflicts, particularly emotional-social and cognitive skills, including problem-solving abilities. Well-designed programs for fostering constructive conflict resolution among children, along with specific methods and heuristic techniques, facilitate the development of the range of these competencies in children.

### **Educational programmes developing children's competences in dealing with conflict situations**

The development of skills of constructive functioning in conflict situations and inclusive conflict resolution is based on the formation of emotional, social and intellectual development of individuals, which consists, among others, of emotional self-awareness, self-control, empathy, ability to cooperate, communication, creativity in solving problems, as well as enrichment of knowledge about bias in the conflict process, tolerance for difference, "categories" of difference. As research shows, educational activities in this field should be undertaken in early childhood – this is when the most effective and long-lasting acquisition of the above-mentioned skills takes place. The following programmes help to develop these competences in children:

- Peaceful Kids ECSEL programme – designed for preschool children,
- A programme developed by the Creative Response to Conflict (CRC) organisation for children at younger school ages,

- Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) developed by Linda Lantieri for children and adolescents (Deutsch, 1993, pp. 510-517; De Vries, Zan, 1994; Sandy, Cochran, 2005, pp. 312-338).

It is advocated that these programmes should be introduced into kindergarten and school curricula and that they be systematically implemented during daily activities with children (during specially prepared lessons) rather than in occasional and irregular activities. Emphasis is placed on emotional and social development in these programmes because it is believed that "in early childhood, feelings and emotions are the most important intellectual puzzles that children must solve before they can successfully navigate the maze of complex cognitive tasks at later stages of development" (Sandy, Cochran, 2005, p. 312).

These programmes also have another purpose, namely to make participants aware that it is extremely important to shape a child's self-esteem and self-efficacy during childhood, and that any "belittling" of a child can do great harm to his or her emotional development and motivation to act. It is stressed that constructively resolved conflict is one of the most important elements of overcoming egocentrism and gaining new knowledge about oneself and others. Conflict is therefore an opportunity to develop emotional, social, intellectual and moral skills by dealing with points of disagreement. It can therefore have a developmental dimension, as resisting and integrating conflict is usually an important step in an individual's development.

The involvement of parents, guardians, educators together with teachers in the process of learning about conflict phenomena, analysing their dynamics and meaning in the life of an individual, in the life of a child is an important element of constructive conflict resolution programmes among children. During the workshop meetings parents and guardians are presented with different behaviours in conflict situations, and the most constructive ones, leading to a common solution, are highlighted. It is important to accompany the child in discovering his or her own feelings and to create an atmosphere of acceptance and trust between teachers, parents and children. It is also stressed that instead of discipline in the form of shouting, arguing and harsh punishments, clear rules and fair praise for following them should be introduced.

Constructive conflict resolution programmes for children use a combination of mental and practical training, namely:

- children learn first about basic feelings (sadness, anger, fear, joy) and then about more complex feelings (e.g. disappointment, embarrassment, excitement); children learn to name feelings, to recognise them in themselves and then in others;

- children then develop skills in dealing with unwanted feelings - learning how to hold back anger, manage sadness and jealousy and how to experience and show empathy;

- children are also introduced to constructive conflict behaviour strategies that teach them not to react with aggression, violence or to give in and be passive.

These skills are taught:

- in kindergarten by re-enacting in puppet theatre various situations that are difficult for children and by exposing the negative consequences of certain behaviour;

- at school by acting out in lessons in small groups or in front of the whole class various conflict situations close to the children and then working out various ways of solving the problem.

School children are also:

- taught to develop cooperative skills (drawing in groups, building structures with blocks together, telling stories together);

- prepared, especially in the older grades, to act as mediators (Carnevale, Pruitt, 1992, pp. 531-582) who would help resolve conflicts to the satisfaction of both sides, teach how to avoid fights, deal with insults;

- and are trained in the art of making and keeping friends to prevent social isolation, which sometimes leads to violence and aggression.

Exercises in the above-mentioned areas are adapted to the children's cognitive abilities and repeated many times so that the skills acquired become habitual. These programmes emphasise the need to continue practising at subsequent stages of development and the need to develop the aforementioned educational synergy between parents and teachers, as only a holistic approach increases the likelihood that what children learn in emotional and social skills classes will be tested and practised not only in kindergarten and school, but also in the peer environment on the playground, in the yard or in the family environment.

When children improve their ability to function constructively in conflict situations they also learn that the way in which a contentious issue can be resolved is often biased. It is very often the case that the perception of the behaviour, motivations and positions of both parties is distorted and the conflict is misperceived. It is therefore necessary to make children aware of certain distortions in this area. Typical ones, characteristic of conflict situations, include:

- "the illusion of one's own nobility" (mirroring) - involving seeing only highly moral motives for action in oneself and appearing to be the object of malicious, unfair treatment by the partner;

- "looking at someone's hands" - seeing the flaws and faults of another person while being unaware of these faults in oneself or justifying one's own negative behaviour and intentions;

- "dual ethics", which manifests itself in justifying one's own reprehensible sides, while ruthlessly condemning them in one's partner;

- "everything is obvious" - resulting from simplifying the situation, often omitting its important aspects in order to confirm oneself in the belief that one's own behaviour is right and one's partner's is wrong (Johnson, 1992, pp. 205-206).

Experiments by, among others, Solomon E. Asch have shown that in the process of perceiving people, the subject goes far beyond the information provided. In children, this is especially true of a person's physical characteristics. "Like adults, they attribute negative traits to ugly people, e.g. aggressiveness, and socially approved traits to pretty people" (Skarżyńska, 1981, p. 111). This tendency to look for connections between physical and psychological characteristics is referred to as "metaphorical generalisation". It also translates into a tendency to attribute less responsibility for aggressive behaviour to physically attractive children than to physically unattractive children.

Children's inaccurate perception of conflict situations may be conditioned by the level of cognitive development, properties of cognitive structure related to interpersonal decentration, which helps to differentiate own and other's experiences, thoughts, and thus to perceive other people's states and needs and to enter other people's situation. Interpersonal decentration is that property of the cognitive structure which makes it possible to perceive a given social situation simultaneously from the point of view of different people participating in it and to coordinate different points of view (Skarżyńska, 1981, p. 16). Thus, interpersonal decentration is a very important ability in social contacts and conflict-free action, conditioning effective cognition not only of physical reality, but also of other people and social interactions. This skill allows one to modify one's own behaviour depending on the anticipated reactions of the partner to this behaviour. Therefore this developmental trait, so important for constructive conflict resolution, should be improved in children, e.g. through training consisting in taking different perspectives of the people involved in a given situation or inductive procedures consisting in showing children the positive and negative consequences of their behaviour for other people.

### **Problem solving in conflict resolution process**

In the conflict resolution process it is very important to identify the problem, to consider it from the point of view of all parties involved. The prob-

lem-solving approach to dispute resolution "treats conflict as a puzzle or interpersonal dilemma that must be resolved" (Weitzman, Weitzman, 2005, p. 189). Problem solving is understood as "any effort to develop a mutually acceptable solution to a conflict" (Weitzman, Weitzman, 2005, p. 189), based on discussions in which stakeholders exchange information about interests and priorities, work together to identify the real issues that divide them, brainstorm alternative solutions and evaluate these alternatives together from the point of view of the common good.

Brainstorming is a heuristic method developed by Alex Faickney Osborn. It is an unconventional way for teams to search for new ideas to solve problems. It is implemented in three stages: the first one is specifying the task to be solved, the second one is a team search for ideas, and the third one is their compilation and selection. This method is also called postponed evaluation, because it is extremely important in it to separate in time the process of creating ideas from their evaluation.

An interesting technique, which is a variation of brainstorming, is "paradoxical brainstorming", which consists of three stages. We start by giving suggestions for solving the problem (by brainstorming we respect all the ideas given) e.g.: what to do to reduce conflicts and aggression in the classroom? Then we focus on proposing ideas related to the problem: what can be done to make children cause as many conflicts as possible? Finally, we consider what can be done to turn the negative aspects of the situation into positive ones. "The following principles are important when solving problems with this method:

- ideas are not evaluated,
- ideas of colleagues are an inspiration,
- fantasy (giving fantastic solutions without real applications - intuitive and absurd),
- quantity turning into quality (the more ideas, the better the final solutions may be)" (Jađer, 2009, p. 91).

Research by authors such as Peter J. Carnevale and Dean G. Pruitt, as well as Dean G. Pruitt and Jeffrey Z. Rubin has shown that concern for the interests of others, empathy-based behaviour and pro-social aspects play a huge role in problem-solving-based conflict resolution. It turned out that when participants:

- do not care about their own interests, they adopt a strategy of passivity;
- care about the other party's outcome and not their own, they are likely to choose a submissive strategy;
- are primarily concerned with their own interests, they will tend to favour competitive strategies;
- care about both their own and others' interests, they focus on solving the problem together (Weitzman, Weitzman, 2005, p. 193).

The approach to conflict resolution presented here corresponds to a non-authoritarian pedagogy – that of Thomas Gordon, which is the concept of constructive and symmetrical interpersonal relations “without winners and without losers”. This pedagogy emphasises the importance of the principles of interpersonal communication in the process of overcoming disputes and points to the need to externalise conflicts and treat them naturally as something positive (Śliwerski, 2004, p.143).

The essence of proper communication, as Thomas Gordon has shown, should be dialogue based on active listening and avoiding communication barriers such as ordering, commanding, threatening, moralising, lecturing, judging, criticising, ridiculing. Communicating in the convention of dialogue allows both parties to the conflict to truly exchange views, define their goals and focus carefully on the problem. Dialogue emphasises mutual trust and respect (respect is an expression of recognising a person as he or she is and trust prevents suspicion, ambiguity about partner’s intentions and goals) which foster openness in communication, requiring:

- talking about the partner’s behaviour and not about the partner himself or herself;
- describing the behaviour rather than judging it;
- disclosing one’s own observations rather than making interpretations or generalisations;
- presenting ideas and providing information rather than lecturing and giving advice (Gordon, 2000, pp. 93-101).

Thomas Gordon emphasises that conflict resolution is a multi-stage process, which consists of recognising and defining the problem constituting the essence of the conflict, searching for various possible solutions to the problem, critically evaluating draft solutions, finding a solution that would be the most beneficial for both parties to the conflict, working out ways to implement the identified solution, and testing the effectiveness of the identified solution in practice (Gordon, 2000, pp. 242-249).

It should be noted that Jeffrey S. Turner and Donald B. Helms show that problem-solving skills develop with age. The improvement of children’s problem-solving abilities is implied by their cognitive achievements linked to the curriculum requirements set by the school. Developing children’s perseverance in overcoming problems, concentration and independence in the process of completing tasks, as well as memory skills related to organising, searching and retrieving information placed in the memory store also play an important role here.

Consequently, children differ in the behavioural models they use to solve cognitive tasks (cognitive styles) by which they find solutions to problems. Children may therefore display:



- an analytical style - when they explore the fine details of stimulus objects;
- a superior style - when they search for common properties of objects;
- a functional-relational style, which involves linking objects or events into groups that have some interacting properties;
- an activity-locating style, reflecting classification on the basis of shared location.

Research on children between the ages of six and eleven shows that older children are better at using superior and analytical styles, while younger children (between the ages of four and six) are better at using a functional-relational style.

In the process of problem solving, not only the cognitive style can be taken into account, but also the cognitive tempo presenting the way the problem is evaluated. Thus, impulsive children tend to concentrate hastily on the first idea that comes to their mind in relation to the problem posed for solution. Without thinking about its correctness, they often make mistakes. In contrast, children who use reflexivity, spending more time analysing the problem, considering more hypotheses and reflecting on their effectiveness, make fewer mistakes in the problem-solving process (Turner, Helms, 1999, pp. 296-299).

It follows from the above that problem-solving skills can and should be developed in children in a variety of learning situations. It is the ability to use, in particular, techniques for developing divergent thinking, reflecting intellectual creative abilities, which are revealed as the ability to find many different solutions to a problem, to analyse many ideas (Groborz, Ślifierz-Wasilewska, 2003, pp. 208-209). This type of thinking is considered to be a priority in the process of generating different solutions to contentious issues.

## Conclusion

The challenge facing upbringing and education in the modern era is to address differences that divide us through cooperative means, aiming for a collaborative problem-solving approach. This entails resolving contentious issues in a manner that allows for the satisfaction of the needs and aspirations of both sides involved in the conflict, fostering subjective and dialogical engagement while adhering to the following norms:

- I critique ideas, not individuals; I challenge others' ideas while recognizing their competence and refraining from personal disapproval;
- I maintain a distinction between my self-worth and criticism of my ideas by others;

- I actively listen to diverse ideas, opinions, and viewpoints, even when in disagreement;
- I analyze the perspectives of both sides of the conflict, identifying differences and seeking common ground;
- I endeavor to comprehend differing viewpoints and consider alternate perspectives to understand opposing positions;
- I am open to changing my stance based on evidence or persuasive arguments.

Hence, subjective-dialogue conflict resolution, epitomized by the “win-win” solution, is an acquired skill – an art form that can be cultivated and mastered. By honing competence in constructive conflict resolution from an early age, individuals can navigate interpersonal conflicts across various life domains more effectively. This developmental process is invaluable, representing an investment in the future and contributing to the cultivation of a “conflict culture” within societies.

**Author contributions**

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work.

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