

Supporting children to negotiate

Negotiation is a skill children will need, yet surprisingly it is often one that is rarely taught. Throughout our lives, negotiation will form a large portion of our experiences, both in childhood and beyond, for example, negotiating a turn of a toy, negotiating control of the television remote, negotiating friendships, negotiating work/project roles and responsibilities, negotiating employment contracts and working hours and negotiating the price of an item for sale. Because negotiation takes place in dyadic situations, skilful and fair-minded negotiators do more than just find satisfaction in meeting their own needs. They also achieve outcomes that meet the satisfaction of all involved. When this occurs, personal satisfaction levels increase exponentially, thus having a positive effect on relationships and self-esteem. For this reason, it cannot be understated how important it is to teach children to negotiate in ways that are fair, respectful and equitable.

Why negotiation does not come naturally

Negotiation is not a skill that can typically be learnt from a textbook, nor is it a skill that is naturally occurring. Instead, it relies heavily on lived experience. The difficulty for most children is that negotiation requires a high degree of rational thinking and the ability to simultaneously consider another person's point of view, as well as their own. Speaking generally, the need for negotiating results from two people having opposing wishes. The difficulty for children is that in the heat of the moment they are typically trying to make the outcome of a situation fall in their favour, thus meaning they are likely to become less receptive to others' needs, wishes and ideas. As such, they need an adult's voice to become their own, to teach them how to problem solve, to guide them and to act as a child-friendly and, when possible, non-directive mediator.

The adult's role

It can be tempting to solve children's problems for them, for example, telling a child to share the bike with their sibling because they've already had a long enough turn. While this type of strategy is not taboo, it does unfortunately eliminate the types of learning opportunities children need to figure out how to solve future problems for themselves.

When beginning to teach negotiation skills, it can be beneficial to clarify what both children want. For example, "You want the bike, Tim, and you also want the bike, Darla. Because there's only one bike we've got a problem." This step might seem like the obvious is being stated, but for children it is not. Children, especially when their focus is getting an outcome they desire, will be working from an egocentric mindset, making it difficult for them to understand that both people involved have opposing points of view. Once the problem is clarified, the next step in the negotiation ladder can be undertaken.

The next step involves the adult asking one of the children to come up with an idea that will help them to get what they want. In instances where children cannot think of a solution independently, adults can ask the child if they need some help. When children agree to help, adults can give them a possible solution, remaining open to the idea that the child may reject their suggestion.

Once the child has decided upon and voiced their idea to the other party involved, the adult turns mediator, restating the possible solution provided by the first child to the second, for example, "Tim has suggested that he will have a turn first, Darla, and then you can have a turn second." Following this up with a closed question such as, "Does this work for you?" invites the other child to join the negotiation process. In instances where the second child agrees with the first, the problem is solved and the adult can move into a position whereby they make sure the agreement is kept. Instances where the second child does not agree sees the adult shifting back to a passive role, encouraging the second child to come up with an alternative solution.

Not surprisingly, the adult can sometimes feel like they are watching a tennis match as they support children to decide if they will agree on a solution. On the first few occasions, children may stick to their guns and refuse to budge on their ideas; however, as they become more acquainted with the negotiation process, they will begin to form different attitudes and approaches as they work with others.

The benefits of children doing it for themselves

When children have the opportunity to take ownership of the negotiation process, they are likely to feel more satisfied with the outcome. Additionally, once children are taught a technique such as the one above, they become more adept in replicating it without adult support. When this occurs, adults are able to witness firsthand the fruits of their efforts and feel more assured that children will be able to take ownership of future negotiations.

The gist of it all

Negotiation skills are those which benefit people throughout their lives. The earlier children are taught how to negotiate the more adept they will become at using these skills in all areas of their lives. Negotiation supports children to articulate and look after their own needs without disregarding the needs of others. Children are not natural negotiators and need help in order to develop this skill in ways that consider the needs of all people involved. Adults can use a variety of strategies to support children to learn how to negotiate. One such way is to support children to come up with solutions to their own problems. As children become more adept at using the techniques, the adult will become more assured that the child will be able to manage negotiation processes without them in the future.

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