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**Direct Family Engagement and Advocacy Activities**

**Part B: Strategies and Tools to Manage Conflict**

**Conflict Defined**

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction. Conflict arises from differences, both large and small. It occurs whenever people disagree over their values, motivations, perceptions, ideas, or desires. One of the mistakes people make when dealing with conflict is assuming that all kinds of conflict are the same. Each conflict situation has different factors contributing to it. When conflict involves two or more parties, there might be many interconnected, underlying issues going on. Therefore, understanding the source of a conflict can go a long way to resolve them.

**Five Main Causes of Conflict**

* **Relationship**: The parent and teacher may possess a general distrust/dislike of a person of the other, resulting in poor communication and unauthentic interactions.
* **Data:** The parent or teacher may perceive the other to be miscommunicating information or providing inaccurate information or data. Someone may question the relevance of methods, processes, or data.
* **Interest**: The parent and teacher may be in competition to achieve their needs. There is a perception that someone is creating an obstacle to getting your needs met.
* **Values:** The teacher or parent may have an unwillingness to accept the opinion or input of others and believe that others are not supportive of them.
* **Structural:** Unequal power or authority, no control over how resources distributed, time constraints, or systemic processes that create barriers for certain groups to gain full benefit.

**Gaining Insight Below the Surface of Conflict**

The layers of conflict are much like those of an onion. There are many dynamics to be considered, but only those on the surface are visible, until we start to peel off the layers to see what lies at the core. Doing so allows a better understanding of the conflicting parties’ positions and their real interests and needs. It helps us to distinguish between what the different parties say they want, and what they really want and need. (Fisher, S. et al., 2000. *Working with conflict*.)

**Probing Questions to Peel Back the Layers of Conflict**

* Why do you feel so strongly?
* What would make you feel better?
* What might be another way to get what you want?
* What if we tried (…)?

**Conflict Resolution Measures**

Conflict resolution moves through 3 distinct stages. Each stage provides opportunities to effectively manage conflict.

* **Preemptive measures** are those that you can enact within your team to reduce or control the way a conflict is handled before it occurs. Just to be clear here, we are not suggesting the use of preemptive force, whereby one party launches an offensive on a potential enemy before that enemy has had a chance to carry out an attack of their own.
* **Confrontation measures** are those you employ during a conflict situation. Using mediation and other resolution tools can create “negative peace” (where the fighting as stopped) or “positive peace” (where there is human understanding, balance of power and cooperation).
* **Post-conflict & rebuilding** are the measures you employ to promote reconciliation, creating infrastructure to manage conflicts or prevent recurrence of conflict.

**Eight Strategies to Manage a Conflict Situation**

When conflict situations are not properly managed, they have the potential to escalate into heated arguments, physical abuse, and shattered relationships. The next time you find yourself in a conflict confrontation, use these 8 strategies to avoid escalation and preserve the relationship.

1. **Identify your emotions before you react**

The most power we have during a conflict is to notice when we’re triggered. Look for physical cues, sensations in your body, your tell-tale signs. One of the keys to conflict resolution is to try not to engage when you’re triggered.

1. **Take a deep breath and walk away**

If you’re triggered, take a pause.  This might mean remaining in physical proximity but taking a few deep breaths or it might mean taking a break and walking away. This is very difficult to do in the heat of a conflict, but taking time to cool off gives you time to reconnect with the other person in a completely different head space. When you’re feeling open again, reconnect and take responsibility for your part in the conflict.

1. **Imagine and approach with a positive resolution in mind**

As you imagine a positive resolution to the conflict, take some time to examine your behavior and what you might be contributing to the conflict.

Ask yourself, *Am I …*

* *Communicating openly?*
* *Appropriate?*
* *Sending mixed signals?*
* *Encouraging?*
* *Nurturing?*
* *Modeling respect?*
1. **Use the I-message**

An “I-message” focuses on your own feelings and experiences, rather than attacking, criticizing, or blaming the other person based on your perception of what they have done or failed to do. The I-message allows for communication that is less likely to provoke defensiveness and hostility, which tends to escalate conflicts, or to cause the other person to shut down or tune you out, which tends to stifle communication. In addition, using the I-message helps create more opportunities for the resolution of conflict through constructive dialogue about the true sources of the conflict.

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| **The I-Message** | **Attacking the Other** |
| "I feel that I’m not given an opportunity to share my thoughts about my child’s needs” | "You always let the White parents share their thoughts about the needs of their children.”  |

I feel \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (describe how you feel)

When you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (describe inappropriate behavior)

Because \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_(describe impact)

I would prefer \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ (describe desired behavior)

1. **Active listening & paraphrasing**

The inability to listen and exchange perspectives is by far the biggest barrier to resolving conflict. These are the verbal and non-verbal cues you’re conveying when you’re listening actively.

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| **What You See (Non-verbal)** | **What You Hear (Verbal)** |
| * Put your ego on the shelf
* Eye contact; focusing on the other person
* Leaning forward a little or nodding
* Sitting still
* Letting the other person finish what they’re saying without interruption
* Interested silence; giving a person time to respond
 | * Restating what someone says
* Reflecting what someone is feeling
* Asking open-ended questions like, “What happened? How did you feel about that?”
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1. **Validating**

Validation is a response that shows you accept another person’s feelings and point of view, even when you don’t agree with them. It means answering in a way that shows the other person you believe their experience or statement is valid, and you don’t intend to change their view or correct them for being “wrong.” But validation goes beyond simply listening. It’s about showing you really hear someone and understand why they feel the way they do (Human Performance Resources by CHAMP [HPRC], 2023).

1. **Mutual empathy**

You can demonstrate empathy by finding something within your character or experience that resonates with the other person. For example, the two of you may have a child in preK and one in college. You could relate and find common ground through your shared experiences parenting children with wide gaps in age. This enables them to forge stronger connections, build trust, and increase understanding. Empathizing helps you identify the other party’s key concerns and sacred values.

1. **Collaborating on resolution and future interaction**

Collaborating conflict management, which is sometimes referred to as a “win-win” strategy, is an effective means of restoring peace. Collaborating on a resolution considers the goals, beliefs, expectations, and underlying interests of both parties. A win-win solution is characterized by both parties going forth empowered and whole, with a clear indication of how they will handle conflict situations in the future.