



A Healthy Outlook!

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Resolving Conflicts in Relationships

Every relationship has conflicts. In some relationships, conflict is a serious problem; in others, differences seem to be resolved without creating a major incident. Think about the kinds of conflicts that happen in your daily life. These are typical:

- * Disagreements over who should do what.
- * Disagreements over how things should be done.
- * Conflicts of personality and style.

Nonproductive Ways of Dealing With Conflict

Now that we've identified some typical situations where conflicts arise in your everyday life, let's look at some examples of ways that people deal with them. These are the common ones:

- * Deny the conflict; wait until it goes away.
- * Change the subject.
- * React emotionally: Become aggressive, abusive, hysterical, or frightening.
- * Find someone to blame.
- * Make excuses.
- * Let someone else deal with it.

All these responses to conflict have one thing in common: They are all nonproductive and they are all destructive, some physically. This is why learning to manage conflict is so important.

Factors That Affect How People Manage Conflict

The skills involved in managing conflict are learned behaviors. None of us are born knowing how to deal with differences of opinion, arguments, or turf wars. Some of the factors that affect how we behave in the face of conflict are as follows:

- * **Behavior learned in families.** In some families, conflict and confrontation are a communication style. In others, conflict always remains hidden.
- * **Behavior learned from role models.** People who have had a teacher or boss who modeled effective conflict resolution skills are more likely to develop these skills themselves.
- * **Status.** People in higher-status positions usually feel freer to engage in conflict and are less likely to avoid confrontation.
- * **Unwritten rules.** Some groups encourage conflict; others have unwritten rules that it is to be contained or avoided.
- * **Gender differences.** Males are generally encouraged to be more confrontational than females. ■

Tips for Negotiating and Resolving Conflict

Use active listening skills.

Active listening is a valuable skill for resolving conflicts because it enables you to demonstrate that you understand what another person is saying and how he or she is feeling about it. Active listening includes restating, in your own words, what the other person has said. Active listening is a way of checking whether your understanding is correct. It also demonstrates that you are listening and you are interested and concerned. These all help resolve a situation where there are conflicting points of view. Demonstrate your interest in the other person with nonverbal cues. Maintain eye contact, don't interrupt, and let the person vent. Clarify by asking questions.

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Tips for active listening are as follows:

- ◆ Give your undivided attention.
- ◆ Make eye contact.
- ◆ Show interest by leaning forward, nodding, saying things like “go on” and “uh huh.”
- ◆ Keep an open mind; don’t prepare your own reply while the other person is speaking.
- ◆ Listen to the entire message.
- ◆ Ask for clarification.

Acknowledge and restate the other person’s feelings and concerns.

Reflect on what you heard by paraphrasing. Here are some examples:

- ◆ “Sounds like you’re upset about what happened at work.”
- ◆ “You’re annoyed by my lateness, aren’t you?”
- ◆ “You sound really stumped about how to solve this problem.”
- ◆ “It makes you angry when you find errors on Joe’s paperwork.”

Acknowledging that you’ve understood is not the same as agreement. It is a way of demonstrating that you hear and understand another person’s point of view.

Deep breathing.

Use a deep-breathing relaxation exercise to help you monitor your own stress level. Breathe in through your nose, hold in the air for 3–5 seconds, and then exhale slowly. Repeat.

Maintain your boundaries.

Change what you can to improve the situation and let go of what you can’t control. Take responsibility for what’s yours and apologize if appropriate.

Communicate your own feelings and needs.

Use “I” messages. Don’t take it personally.

Find points of agreement that you both have in common.

Utilize problem-solving skills. Identify the problem concretely, brainstorm solutions to the problem, agree and commit to the best solution, think through the consequences of the best solution, try the best solution, reevaluate it, confirm details of the solution, and keep your promises.

General tips for managing conflict

1. Stick with “I” statements; avoid “you” statements.
2. Avoid name-calling and put-downs (“A reasonable person could see that...”).
3. Soften your tone.
4. Take a time-out (“Let’s take a break and cool down.”)
5. Acknowledge the other person’s point of view (agreement is not necessary).
6. Avoid defensive or hostile body language (rolling eyes, crossing arms in front of body, tapping foot).
7. Be specific and factual; avoid generalities.

If you are having difficulty resolving a conflict at work, the Dispute Resolution Program can help. Mediation services are provided by the Conflict Resolution Center of Montgomery County at no cost to MCPS employees experiencing workplace conflict. For more information or a referral, call the Dispute Resolution Program at the EAP at 301-460-2100.

Some information for this article, written by Samantha Shea, LPC, was adapted from the Therapists Newsletter Kit. Used with permission. ■

For Supervisors—Recognize Positive Performance

When determining what to document regarding employee performance, supervisors should be sure to document all positive performance situations, along with constructive criticism. An employee’s file should reflect his or her complete contribution (entire performance history and trends). This positive recognition breeds trust and loyalty with your employees! Employees appreciate when you recognize the good along with the not-so-great performance! ■

Teens, Alcohol, and Drugs

Eighty-seven percent of high school seniors have used alcohol. If your teen is a high school senior, he or she probably is included in this number. But how do you detect if your child is drinking alcohol or using drugs? Look for signs, such as—

- ☛ change in academic/extracurricular performance,
- ☛ change in friends,
- ☛ excessive tiredness,
- ☛ impaired concentration,
- ☛ low self-esteem,
- ☛ change in appetite, and/or
- ☛ illnesses/hangovers.

Alcohol or drug use can have serious consequences, including HIV/AIDS, cardiovascular disease, stroke, cancer, hepatitis, and lung disease. They also make teens more vulnerable to sexual assault. If you think your adolescent may have a problem or if you would like more information, please call the EAP now at 301-460-2100. ■

Quote:

“I not only use all the brains that I have, but all that I can borrow.”

—Woodrow Wilson

Managing Today's Stepfamily

As a member of a stepfamily, you know how difficult it can be to integrate all of the new members and adjust to new boundaries and rules. The following ideas may help you make a successful transition in which all family members feel included and important.

Have patience.

Forming a new family takes time. Just because you love your partner, it is unrealistic to think that you will automatically love his or her children. It is equally unrealistic to expect that your new partner's children will instantly love you.

Expect to adjust.

All children experience a difficult time following a divorce or remarriage. It takes time, patience, and perhaps some professional assistance, but most children are able to regain their emotional stability. It is important that adults manage their own recovery in order to help children adjust healthily as well.

Expect confusion.

Establishing a stepfamily is a confusing time for everyone. Think about how confusing it is for a child to become part of two new families. Parents and children must learn to understand the new structure and navigate the new boundaries.

Allow time for grieving.

Adult losses are not the same as those of the children, and both must be respected. Adults grieve the following losses:

- ✓ Loss of a partner.
- ✓ Loss of a marriage relationship.
- ✓ Lost dreams of the way they thought it would be.
- ✓ Changes resulting from divorce or death (e.g., moving to a new house, starting a new job, adjusting to a new lifestyle).



Children grieve too.

Their losses are usually different from those of their parents. For example—

- ✓ they may be living with one parent instead of two.
- ✓ they may have less time with one or both parents during times of dating or remarriage.
- ✓ they may have a new place to live and go to a new school.
- ✓ they have lost the fantasy of how they wanted their family to be.

Children have an especially difficult time when their parents are hostile with one another, when one or both of their parents remarry, and if they have trouble accepting their new stepparents.

Be clear about the rules.

Ideally, both sets of parents should discuss the family rules and what will happen if rules are broken. Most successful stepfamilies have learned that the rules should be decided together in the beginning, and the biological parent should do the explaining and the disciplining. The stepparent may have more involvement after the relationship with the stepchild has been established.

Show the child love.

Sometimes children need love the most when it is the most difficult time to give it to them. While bad behavior should never be rewarded, good behavior should always be praised.

Please know that the MCPS EAP is available to talk with you about stepfamily issues and refer you to experienced mental health professionals to help you through the rough spots.

Written by Janet Asher, M.S., adapted from the Therapist's Newsletter Kit. Used with permission. ■

An Underground Drug Trend

Have you ever heard your teen mention the words lean, barre, player potion, purple stuff, or syrup in relation to music or a party? The use of cough syrups combined with a mixture of soda/alcohol started as a regional underground drug trend, whose roots are in Houston, Texas. A particular genre of music called “Screw”—hip-hop music with a markedly slow beat—has perpetuated its popularity. What makes this trend more challenging to deter is the fact that cough syrup is legal and easy to purchase.

While teens have abused cough syrup since the early 1990s, the biggest difference today is they are now purchasing large amounts of syrup off the Internet. Here are some specific tips if you suspect your teen is misusing prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medicines:

1. Reduce accessibility.
2. Avoid overstocking cough syrup and take inventory of your medicine cabinet.
3. Monitor your teen’s Internet use.
4. Be aware of the type of music your teen is listening to.
5. Be aware of possible signs of abuse such as empty bottles in your teen’s room or backpack.

Most important, speak with your children often about the importance of carefully following directions on the labels of all OTC medications. Help them understand the dangers of misusing OTC cough and cold medications. Parents are the greatest influence in their teen’s decision to use or not use drugs; so what you say matters! ■

Adopted from Parenting Tips newsletter, TheAntiDrug.com, Distribution date 2/6/06. Visit TheAntiDrug.com’s Drug Information Section for more information on prescription and over-the-counter drug abuse: http://www.theantidrug.com/drug_info/. Also, remember that a free screening for alcohol and drug use is available through the Student Assistance team at each secondary school.



Upcoming Events

April

Alcohol Awareness Month

April 6

April 26

National Alcohol Screening Day
Workshop:

Alcohol and Drugs: Use, Abuse, and
Dependence, 12–1:00 p.m., CESC, Room 120

May

Mental Health Month

May 4–10

National Suicide Awareness Week

June

June 27:

HIV Testing Day

Ask the EAP

Q. I would like to use my health plan to access a psychotherapist—where do I begin?

A. First of all, it’s important to note that the process of getting to a network provider works a little differently for each of the MCPS insurance plans. For Kaiser, you set up an appointment by first contacting their behavioral health access line (866-530-8778). For United Behavioral Health and Carefirst BlueChoice, there is an 800 number on the back of your insurance card that you can call to get preauthorization. Optimum Choice is the only plan that requires you to go to your primary care physician to get a referral (the referral is to a psychiatrist, who can then refer you to a therapist). If the process seems confusing or overwhelming, feel free to call the EAP for assistance on accessing a therapist, including recommendations to therapists we are familiar with. ■

**Do you have a question for the EAP?
Send your questions via FirstClass,
Outlook, or the Pony to Jeff Becker.**



A Healthy Outlook!

To help employees with
troubling issues before they
become overwhelming.



EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE

SPECIALISTS: Debbie Tipton
Robyn Rosenbauer
Jeff Becker

EAP at North Lake Center
15101 Bauer Drive
Rockville, Maryland 20853
phone: 301-460-2100
www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/EAP

Important Notice: Information in *A Healthy Outlook!* is for general information purposes only and is not intended to replace the counsel or advice of a qualified health professional. For further questions or help with specific problems or personal concerns, contact your employee assistance professional.

You may contact us or send your questions and comments to
Debra_Tipton@fc.mcps.k12.md.us.

Please note that e-mail is not necessarily confidential.

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