

# TIP SHEET: RESOLVING FAMILY CONFLICT

Conflict is part of life. It cannot be avoided. Often the most intense conflicts we experience are at home, within our family. During this period of social distancing and isolation, all members of your household may be experiencing new and increased friction, disagreements and annoyances. The good news is that conflicts large and small can be resolved.

There are simple steps that can be used during conflict to help shift you and other family members from an unproductive state of mind to one that is more resourceful. These can also help to keep conflict from escalating further, which happens when raw emotions take over.

## STEP 1: CALM DOWN

First, acknowledge for all family members involved that emotions are high. Suggest some quick ways to calm down, such as a deep breathing exercise or a short break to rest, walk or listen to music. Even a 30-second quiet 'pause' can be effective.

If the conflict includes children, it is helpful to approach them at eye level and use gentle touch. Provide reassurance that the issue can be resolved. Feeling heard will help a child change focus to the calming suggestions.

## STEP 2: SHARE NEEDS

When a conflict triggers strong feelings, opposing needs are often at the core. Come back together and offer each person an opportunity to express what it is that they need. Anger and hurt usually accompany conflict and the opportunity to express these feelings is necessary before effective problem-solving can take place.

Reflect back or repeat what has been shared to make sure each person feels understood. It can be particularly helpful for children to give feelings a name. "You want a turn to play and it is frustrating when you have to wait." This begins to build their vocabulary around conflict and increase their ability to express themselves.

## STEP 3: DEFINE THE PROBLEM

Understanding everyone's needs will bring clarity to the conflict. Now the problem can be summarized in a clear and neutral way – without assigning blame or naming a solution. Neutrality is especially important for children, who are likely to struggle with a perceiving lack of fairness. "Hmmm, I see that two children want to play with the same toy."

## STEP 4: ASK A 'WHAT' QUESTION

Conflict is best solved when all those affected contribute to finding a solution. A good way to start the conversation is with a 'what' question.

- "What could you do to solve this problem?"
- "What other choices do you think might work?"
- "What ways could you take a different approach?"

# TIP SHEET: RESOLVING FAMILY CONFLICT

Even if a particular resolution appears obvious, encourage everyone to brainstorm a list of possibilities before moving forward to put one into practice. Then determine which solution creates the best outcome for all involved. Also seek agreement on new or different actions that will be taken in the future. Get real agreement from everyone - silence is often a sign of passive resistance. Then agree to reevaluate if needed.

## **STEP 5: TAKE A LOOK AT THE SOLUTION**

Each person involved in the conflict will need to try the solution to see if it will work. If only one family member is struggling to change their actions, offer empathy, encouragement and/or help understanding why their needs are still not being met. For children, stay nearby to support the solution and praise the children when problem solving has worked. "I see you found a way to take turns with the toy. That's called cooperation."

Not all solutions will work and if a problem persists, you may need to begin the process over. Adults set the stage for teaching conflict resolution by demonstrating, as issues arise, how to approach and solve problems. The goal in this process should not be to prevent conflict from happening but rather to teach all family members how to resolve conflict in a safe and fair manner.

*Source: Michigan State University Extension*