



Conflict Resolution Guide

Practical strategies for students to prevent, manage and resolve conflict constructively

Purpose of this guide

This guide supports students in understanding conflict, communicating respectfully, de-escalating tense situations, and using collaborative problem-solving, mediation and restorative approaches in academic and everyday settings.

How to use it

Use the guide as a self-study resource, workshop handout, classroom activity booklet, or evidence of structured skills-development resources for student support and well-being.

Based on the uploaded resources: OECD Conflict Resolution brief (2019); Conflict Resolution Resource Guide by Lough Barnes Consulting Group (2017); and Guide to Conflict Resolution.

Contents

1. What conflict resolution means
2. Why conflict resolution matters for students
3. Understanding conflict: roots, dimensions and types
4. Conflict response styles
5. Core communication skills
6. De-escalation checklist
7. A 10-step communication breakthrough
8. Mediation and facilitation basics
9. Restorative questions and making things right
10. Activities and worksheets
11. Quick reference tools
12. References

1. What conflict resolution means

Conflict resolution is the process of understanding the causes and dynamics of a disagreement and then working with others to reach a fair, constructive and sustainable way forward. It involves recognizing that a conflict exists, accepting that it can be addressed, and using negotiation, mediation and collaborative problem-solving to move from tension to agreement.

Key idea

Conflict itself is not the problem. The main issue is how people respond to it. A conflict can damage relationships when handled destructively, but it can also become an opportunity to clarify needs, improve communication and build stronger relationships.

Learning outcomes

- explain what conflict is and why it occurs;
- identify the visible and hidden causes of conflict;
- use active listening, “I” statements and open questions;
- apply basic de-escalation techniques;
- choose an appropriate conflict response style;
- use mediation and restorative questions to support constructive dialogue.

2. Why conflict resolution matters for students

Conflict resolution is a transferable skill for academic life, teamwork, leadership, employment and civic participation. Students regularly work in groups, interact with diverse peers, receive feedback, negotiate responsibilities and manage stress. These situations can create misunderstanding, disagreement or tension.

- **Academic benefits:** constructive conflict resolution can improve classroom and school climate and support learning.
- **Social and emotional benefits:** conflict resolution skills can reduce aggressive behaviour and support empathy, self-regulation, respect and pro-social behaviour.
- **Future-readiness:** students learn to reconcile tensions, take responsibility, collaborate, and solve problems in diverse environments.

3. Understanding conflict: roots, dimensions and types

Conflicts often appear on the surface as arguments, avoidance, complaints, anger or silence. However, the roots may be deeper: unmet needs, perceived unfairness, different values, lack of information, cultural differences, previous negative experiences, power imbalance, stress, or unclear roles and expectations.

Three dimensions of conflict

Dimension	Focus	Guiding question
Cognitive	What people perceive or believe	What does each person think is happening?
Emotional	What people feel	What emotions are present and how strong are they?
Behavioural	What people do	What actions are escalating or reducing the conflict?

Five common types of conflict

Type	Typical cause	Useful response
Relationship conflict	Strong emotions, stereotypes, poor communication, repeated negative behaviour.	Create a safe space for expression, acknowledgement and respectful listening.
Data conflict	Missing, inaccurate or differently interpreted information.	Clarify facts, agree on reliable sources and check assumptions.
Interest conflict	Competing needs such as time, resources, recognition or fairness.	Move from positions to underlying interests and generate options.
Structural conflict	External constraints such as rules, limited resources, deadlines, roles or distance.	Identify the external constraint and redesign the structure where possible.
Value conflict	Different beliefs about what is right, fair, important or acceptable.	Do not try to force values to change; support acknowledgement and respectful boundaries.

4. Conflict response styles

No single style is appropriate in every situation. Effective conflict resolution requires choosing a response that fits the urgency, importance of the relationship, safety risks and the needs of the people involved.

Style	Short description	May be useful when	Risk if overused
Avoiding / withdrawing	Stepping back or delaying engagement.	The issue is minor, timing is wrong, or emotions are too high.	Problems may grow or become hidden.
Accommodating / smoothing	Prioritising the other person's concern.	The relationship is more important than the issue.	Your own needs may be ignored.
Competing / forcing	Using authority or strong assertion.	There is an emergency, safety issue or clear rule.	Creates winners and losers; may damage trust.
Compromising	Each side gives up something to reach a workable decision.	Time is limited or resources are fixed.	The solution may be weak or only partly satisfying.
Collaborating	Exploring interests and building a solution that addresses the needs of all sides.	The issue and relationship are both important.	Requires time, patience and openness.

5. Core communication skills

Principle

People are more willing to participate in resolution when they feel heard. Listening does not mean agreeing; it means understanding before responding.

Active listening: do

- give full attention and avoid interrupting;
- use neutral body language and a calm tone;
- paraphrase: "What I hear you saying is...";
- ask open-ended questions: "What happened from your perspective?";
- check emotions and needs: "It sounds like this felt unfair to you.";
- summarize points of agreement and disagreement.

Active listening: avoid

- judging, blaming or diagnosing the person;
- using absolute words such as “always” and “never”;
- rushing to give advice before understanding;
- turning the conversation into a debate about who is right;
- minimizing emotions with phrases such as “calm down” or “it is not a big deal.”

Useful sentence starters

Purpose	Sentence starter
Express impact without blame	“I felt ___ when ___ because ___. I would like ___.”
Clarify information	“Can you help me understand what you meant by ___?”
Find interests	“What is most important to you in this situation?”
Explore options	“What could work for both of us?”
Check agreement	“Can we summarize what we both agree to do next?”

6. De-escalation checklist

De-escalation aims to reduce emotional intensity so that people can think, listen and make safer decisions. It is not about winning the argument.

- Take a slow breath and lower your voice.
- Keep arms and hands relaxed; avoid clenched fists, pointing or blocking movement.
- Use a respectful distance and, where possible, sit or stand at the same level.
- Acknowledge feelings without agreeing to harmful behaviour.
- Use “I” messages and avoid blame.
- Paraphrase and ask for clarification.
- Offer a short break if emotions are too high.
- Use de-escalating words such as “perhaps,” “maybe,” “what if,” “it seems,” “I wonder.”
- Avoid escalating words such as “always,” “never,” “should,” “must,” “can’t,” and “won’t.”
- Focus on next steps: “What can we do now that helps both sides move forward?”

7. A 10-step communication breakthrough

13. **1. Talk directly:** Speak with the person involved, unless there is a risk of physical harm.
14. **2. Choose a good time and place:** Use a quiet, private and respectful setting.
15. **3. Plan ahead:** State the problem clearly and explain how it affects you.
16. **4. Do not blame or name-call:** Focus on the issue, not on attacking character.
17. **5. Give information:** Describe what you observed, what you need and what you propose.
18. **6. Listen actively:** Show that you are trying to understand the other person’s perspective.
19. **7. Show that you are listening:** Paraphrase, summarize and ask clarifying questions.
20. **8. Talk it through:** Explore needs, interests and possible solutions.

21. **9. Work on a solution:** Generate options and choose a fair, realistic step forward.
22. **10. Follow through:** Agree who will do what, by when, and how progress will be checked.

8. Mediation and facilitation basics

Mediation is a structured conversation supported by a neutral person. The mediator does not decide who is right; instead, the mediator helps people communicate, identify issues, explore interests and reach their own agreement.

Stage	Mediator/facilitator actions
Opening	Set ground rules: respect, one person speaks at a time, confidentiality where appropriate, and safety.
Story sharing	Each person explains what happened, what they need and what they hope will change.
Issue identification	List the main issues and separate facts, feelings, interests and values.
Option generation	Brainstorm possible solutions without judging too early.
Agreement	Select realistic actions, assign responsibilities and set a review time.
Follow-up	Check whether the agreement is working and revise if needed.

9. Restorative questions and making things right

Restorative approaches shift the focus from punishment to responsibility, repair and relationship. They ask what happened, who was affected, what needs have arisen, and what must be done to make things right. These approaches require voluntary participation, respect, safety and appropriate facilitation.

Three restorative pillars

Harms and needs: identify who was affected and what they need. Obligations: clarify what the person who caused harm can do to repair it. Engagement: involve the people affected in a respectful, voluntary process.

Restorative questions

- What happened?
- What were you thinking and feeling at the time?
- Who has been affected and how?
- What do you need now?
- What needs to happen to make things right?
- What agreement can we make to prevent the same problem from happening again?

10. Activities and worksheets

Activity 1: Conflict iceberg

Choose a conflict example. Write the visible behaviour above the line and the possible hidden causes below the line.

Visible behaviour	What did people say or do?
Hidden needs	What might each person need?
Emotions	What feelings are present?
Context	What rules, pressures or past experiences matter?
First safe step	What can be done first to lower tension?

Activity 2: Reframing practice

Escalating statement	Reframe as a neutral, needs-based statement
You never listen to me.	I would like more time to explain my perspective.
This group member is lazy.	The group needs clearer roles and deadlines.
The teacher is unfair.	I want to understand the assessment criteria and feedback.
They are disrespectful.	I need our conversation to stay respectful and focused on the issue.

Activity 3: Conflict style reflection

- Which conflict style do I use most often?
- When has this style helped me?
- When has it created problems?
- Which style should I practise more?
- What concrete behaviour will I try in my next disagreement?

11. Quick reference tools

Before the conversation

- What is the issue?
- What do I feel?
- What do I need?
- What might the other person need?
- What is one fair outcome?

During the conversation

- Speak calmly and specifically.
- Listen before responding.
- Ask open questions.
- Separate the person from the problem.
- Look for interests, not only positions.
- Agree on concrete next steps.

After the conversation

- Write down the agreement.
- Check whether each person understood the same thing.
- Set a follow-up date if needed.
- Reflect on what you learned.

References and source note

- OECD. (2019). Conflict resolution. OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 concept note.
- Parsons, M., Gaudet, J., & Sajjad, A. (2017). Conflict Resolution Resource Guide: A guide for residential care providers to respond to conflict using restorative approaches. Lough Barnes Consulting Group.
- Guide to Conflict Resolution. Uploaded conflict resolution guide covering nature of conflict, types of conflict, ways of dealing with conflict, de-escalation, communication breakthrough and complaints.