

The Nature of Children's Conflict Resolution Styles

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INTRODUCTION

Conflict is an integral part of human relationships. As defined by The University English Dictionary conflict denotes a struggle, a clashing of views or statements, a meeting in opposition or antagonism. The position taken in the present study is that a conflict consists of an opposition between two individuals "when one person does something to which a second person objects" (Hay, 1984, p.2). This particular outlook is consistent with that adopted by Kagan, Knight & Martinez-Romero (1982) in their study of children's conflict resolution styles.

Paradoxically, while conflict may be an important aspect of human relations, conflict as evidenced in children's relations has received scant attention. Research has identified possible sex differences in children's conflict with boys engaging in more direct conflict than girls (Miller, Danaher & Forbes, 1986; Shantz, 1986). Boys do appear to use different conflict resolution strategies (namely more threats and physical force as opposed to negotiation) than girls (Miller et al, 1981). Some evidence also exists that there are developmental changes in children's conflict resolution strategies such that from 5 to 9 years there is an increasing use of a reconciliation conflict resolution style (Aboud, 1981). However, in a contrasting finding Kagan et al (1982) have noted an increasing tendency for children to respond to conflict with conflict across the 5-12 age range. Further research is warranted to clarify the nature of possible developmental trends in conflict resolution styles. To date, there is little information available regarding children's emotional response to conflict. As Shantz (1987) has noted in a major review of the field of children's arousal, to their anger or glee during

adversative episodes ... children's moods and emotions during and after disputes are uncharted areas" (p.300).

The purpose of the present exploratory study was to (i) investigate children's response to conflict across a broad age range, (ii) to examine sex differences in conflict resolution styles and (iii) to investigate the nature of children's feelings associated with conflict.

METHOD

Subjects. Participants in the study were 1,110 year 1 to year 8 children (Mean age = 8.40 years). There were 566 males and 544 females. The sample encompassed a full range of socio-economic groups although it was predominantly middle class.

Procedure. The study was conducted by the teacher education students at the South Australian College of Advanced Education as part of an undergraduate course in child psychology. The students had received input of child interview skills. Following the research procedure of Camras (1980) and Kagan et al (1982) a story was devised entailing an imaginary conflict between the child being tested and a second same sex child. In the story the child was told "Imagine you are playing with a toy of yours and another child of the same age comes up and takes it away from you." Each child was asked to say what they would do and their response was recorded verbatim by the interviewer. Each child was then asked how they would "feel" if this incident happened to them and to indicate the nature of their feeling by choosing a facial expression representing one of the four emotions of happy, sad, neutral or angry. The name of the emotion was written under the facial expression. Research by Camras (1980) suggests that children as young as 5 and 6 years can accurately identify the facial

expressions of happiness, sadness, fear and disgust with significant accuracy.

Adapting Kagan et al's (1982) procedure, 5 main response categories were employed to code children's response to the story namely (i) no conflict - do nothing, (ii) mediate - turn to an authority figure, (iii) direct conflict - fight back, (iv) don't know, (v) assertive response. Full details of the coding protocol are available from the author. To determine the reliability with which responses could be coded into the five main categories 100 responses were coded by two raters. Percentage agreements calculated for the five categories exceeded 80%.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To identify possible developmental changes in children's conflict resolution styles the findings of this study were analysed in terms of four age-groups, (i) 5-6 yrs, (ii) 7-8 yrs, (iii) 9-10 yrs, (iv) 11-13 yrs (Table 1).

From Table 1 it is apparent that the most striking finding was that as the children grew older they were more likely to respond to conflict with conflict (30% of 5-6 year olds vs 72% of 11-13 year olds). A chi-square test indicated a statistically significant relationship between age and conflict resolution strategies ($\chi^2 = 94.7, p < .01$).

The present finding is consistent with that reported by Laursen & Hartup (1989) in a direct observation study of children aged 3-5 years who also noted developmental trends in as much as the younger children used more conciliatory resolution behaviours than older children. A similar finding has been reported by Kagan et al (1982) across the age range 5-12 years. As such, the present findings are consistent with previous research and point to developmental trends in children to increasingly respond to conflict with conflict.

TABLE 1.

Age	Conflict Style						Feelings		
	Do Nothing	Mediate	Direct Conflict	Don't Know	Be Assertive	Angry	Neutral	Happy	Sad
5-6 years	14.9	46.5	29.7	0.7	8.2	42.1	5.2	5.2	47.5
7-8 years	14.8	34.9	36.7	1.8	12.5	47.0	11.4	3.2	38.4
9-10 years	3.7	25.9	55.8	0.0	14.6	70.7	8.2	5.8	15.3
11-13 years	4.6	13.0	71.8	0.0	10.7	72.5	16.8	1.5	9.2

In examining children's expressed feelings associated with conflict it is apparent from the figures in Table 1 that across the age range there is a marked increase in the number of children reporting angry feelings in reaction to conflict (42% vs 73%, $\chi^2 = 78.96$, $p < .01$). This was accompanied by a decrease in the number of children reporting sadness in response to conflict situations (48% vs 9%). As such, as the children develop, angry feelings come to dominate their reported affective reactions to conflict.

The results for sex differences in children's conflict resolution styles are presented in Table 2.

It is apparent from Table 2 that marked sex differences exist between boys and girls in their reported use of the direct conflict resolution style ($\chi^2 = 43.63$, $p < .01$). This finding is certainly consistent with previous research indicating that boys use more direct conflict than girls in response to conflict (Miller et al, 1986; Shantz, 1986). Possible explanations for the finding are that girls' orientations in conflict situations are more toward maintaining relationships than boys (Gilligan, 1982). Girls have also been noted to be more nurturant than boys (Whiting & Edwards, 1973) and to behave more co-operatively (Kagan & Madsen, 1972) which may lead to a lower overall rate of conflict.

Interestingly, in examining male - female differences in affect during conflict boys report significantly more angry feelings than girls ($\chi^2 = 21.00$, $p < .01$). That is, girls and boys are reporting different feelings associated with conflict. Miller et al (1986) in an observational study have

reported that girls are significantly more likely than boys to express anger indirectly during conflict. So it is possible that girls are experiencing anger but reporting or expressing it differently to boys.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, the present exploratory study has highlighted possible developmental changes in boys' and girls' self reported conflict resolution strategies and in their feelings associated with conflict across a broad age-range. Sex differences in conflict have also been identified. Further research of a direct observational nature would help clarify the nature of the present findings. However, on the basis of these findings and previous research it is possible to identify possible implications for parents and educators:

it is important in working with children to identify that conflict is a part of everyday life and that it can be used creatively

the findings highlight the need for alerting children to alternative strategies for resolving conflict, i.e. alternatives to the win-lose orientation

the findings have helped better understand developmental trends in children's conflict resolution styles

the results of the present study draw attention to sex differences in conflict resolution styles and feelings engendered by conflict

attention has been drawn to the different emotions that conflict engenders

the findings highlight the need to help children understand their emotional reactions to conflict.

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TABLE 2.

	Conflict Style					Feelings			
	Do Nothing	Mediate	Direct Conflict	Don't Know	Be Assertive	Angry	Neutral	Happy	Sad
Males	7.8	31.7	52.9	0.4	7.3	61.1	9.9	6.0	23.0
Females	13.4	36.8	33.3	1.1	15.4	47.6	7.9	2.8	41.7