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# Supporting Conflict Resolution in an Early Childhood Montessori Environment

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Supporting Conflict Resolution in an Early Childhood Montessori Environment

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### Abstract

The study aimed to determine in what way daily grace and courtesy lessons and more thoughtful, consistent adult intervention would affect children's responses to conflict in an early childhood Montessori environment. There were 17 participants between the ages of three and six in an independent Montessori school in Northern Michigan. The researcher gave the children daily lessons on aspects of conflict resolution, used a scripted intervention strategy during conflict, and implemented three guided discussions throughout the course of the study. The researcher collected data by tallying number of conflicts, recording responses during guided discussions, recording details and language of each conflict, and reflecting in a journal. The study revealed that children knew many conflict resolution strategies before beginning the intervention, but they used more language from the lessons after the intervention and solved more conflicts independently. The number of conflicts decreased overall but did not consistency decline. The data shows further research is needed to support children to calm down before attempting to apply conflict resolution strategies and to determine the most effective waiting time before teacher intervention.

*Keywords:* conflict resolution, adult intervention, language, Montessori, grace and courtesy lessons

Children typically spend more than half of each day in a school setting and, in turn, around a large, heterogeneous group of other people. By the time a child comes home from school, it is likely he has encountered an idea, goal, value, need, or opinion different than his own. Therefore, it is also likely the average child has experienced a conflict, or the experience of having incompatible ideas, feelings, and interests with another person. I observed children with competing ideas about how to work together, how a family operates, and how to follow a set of classroom expectations. It is logical to conclude that young children need tools to solve conflicts. Much of recent research relating to conflict resolution has explored the various strategies to effectively provide children with these skills.

As children grow, they achieve new levels of independence. In fact, development during childhood is the increasing ability to meet one's needs without the help of others. The ability to solve conflicts is no exception. To mature socially, children must learn to solve conflicts without the aid of an adult. Therefore, an important aspect of teaching conflict resolution to young children is not only giving them tools to use during a conflict, but also supporting them to activate the tools at the appropriate moments.

In a Montessori environment, teachers use grace and courtesy lessons to teach social skills to children in a formal way. Grace and courtesy lessons give children language and strategies to navigate the relationships and social situations around them. Therefore, grace and courtesy lessons can be used as a vehicle for teaching conflict resolution. These lessons give children opportunities to practice and role play fictional scenarios, but do not necessarily give children opportunities to solve a real conflict on their own. To support children to practice conflict resolution without adults, educators

would need to intervene less. Observational methods of education, such as the Montessori Method, encourage teachers to sit on the periphery and only intervene when they deem it necessary. This strategy provides children with time to work through conflict on their own and engage the strategies taught during more formal lessons.

Previous research on conflict resolution strategies has considered less adult intervention, conflict resolution role-playing, and concrete representations of strategies effective ways to teach conflict resolution and reduce aggressive behaviors in classrooms (Heydenberk & Heydenberk., 2007; Roseth et al. , 2008; Arcaro McPhee, Doppler, & Harkins, 2002; Chen et al., 2001). However, there is little research documenting the effectiveness of implementing two or more strategies simultaneously in a mixed-age Montessori environment. Because giving children the knowledge to solve conflicts and the opportunities to independently practice problem solving are equally important, this research worked to support both aspects simultaneously and document their effect on children's responses to conflict. The research was conducted in a mixed-age Montessori classroom with 17 children between the ages of three and six. The preschool and kindergarten classroom is part of an independent Montessori school in Northern Michigan. I observed frequent conflict in the environment that typically resulted in aggressive behaviors, such as pushing or hitting, or children seeking adult help. Similarly, I observed an absence of negotiation, compromise, and non-aggressive problem-solving strategies. The participants seemed to expect adult intervention during a conflict. The purpose of the study was to determine in what way daily grace and courtesy lessons and more thoughtful, consistent adult intervention would affect children's responses to conflict in an early childhood Montessori environment.

## **Review of Literature**

Adults experience conflict every day and are expected to use a variety of tools to problem solve in appropriate, respectful ways. When young children experience conflict, they occasionally use aggressive behaviors, such as hitting, pushing, kicking, or biting to solve the problem. Adults ask children to resolve conflicts but do not provide them with the appropriate tools or sufficient time to practice using conflict resolution tools.

Research showed there are a variety of ways to minimize aggression in early childhood settings by supporting children to use alternative strategies during a conflict.

Young children experience tremendous emotional growth. They are exposed to conflicts in childcare or preschool settings and must practice the process of recognizing as well as acting on their feelings. Reacting to one's emotions appropriately, however, is a process that must be learned (Dettore, 2002). Thus, adults working with children must inform themselves of the most effective ways to teach conflict resolution. Not only do children need tools to solve conflicts in social settings, but their ability to problem solve also predicts school success (Heydenberk & Heydenberk 2007). The literature reviewed suggested encouraging adults to intervene less, modeling conflict resolution in neutral moments, and providing concrete representations of conflict resolution strategies.

### **Defining Conflict and Aggressive Behavior**

Chen, Fein, Killen, and Tam (2001) noted that to understand conflict and resolve problems without aggressive behavior, one must distinguish between the terms aggression and conflict. Chen et al. (2001) suggested, "Equating conflict to aggression, and therefore, also *harm*, leads to the tendency to see conflict as negative events that must be terminated as soon as possible, rather than as natural contexts for children to

develop socially, morally, and cognitively” (p. 540). In other words, conflict is not inherently negative; rather, conflict can lead to growth and progress. Aggressive behaviors, on the other hand, are a negative response to conflict.

Conflict in early childhood is an aspect of social growth when two or more children have incompatible goals, such as ideas, feelings, and interests. Aggressive behavior is the act of doing physical or emotional harm to an individual. For example, two four-year-old children might want to use the same drawing activity. When each child tries to pursue this goal, they become frustrated with one another. When a child experiences such a conflict, he may respond with an aggressive behavior like hitting the other child or he may respond by negotiating, walking away, or finding help. The child's response, therefore, reflects his inventory of problem-solving strategies and emotional development. The larger the child's inventory of approaches to conflict, the more likely he will choose an appropriate reaction. Thus, research on conflict resolution in early childhood aimed to find the most efficient way of expanding children's inventory of strategies.

### **Conflict Resolution Strategies**

In general, adults tend to increase efforts and interventions to solve problems in early childhood settings. However, some experts (Roseth et al. , 2008; Arcaro McPhee, Doppler, & Harkins, 2002; Chen et al., 2001; Heydenberk & Heydenberk, 2007) have suggested supporting conflict resolution in early childhood settings by intervening less. The idea that children need adults as authority figures during conflict is due in large part to educators' personal needs for a quiet classroom rather than the developmental needs of children (Arcaro McPhee et al., 2002). When given the opportunity and skills, children

can and will resolve conflicts (Arcaro Mcphee et al., 2002). In fact, according to a study of 25 preschool classrooms, 37% of 322 conflicts were resolved by the children when adults waited an average of 15 seconds before responding (Chen, 2003, p. 205). If latency time is increased it is reasonable to conclude children would solve even more conflicts independently. Similarly, Roseth et al. (2008) noted children do not only not need intervention from adults, but conflict resolution is more successful without adult intervention. As human beings built to survive on earth, children have the ability to to effectively solve conflicts on their own (Roseth et al., 2008). According to Roseth et al.'s research, children have a natural conflict resolution cycle that typically involves solving a conflict while staying together, rather than separating. However, when adults intervene during a conflict they often separate children. Vestal and Jones (2004), on the other hand, found problem-solving curriculums to be effective in increasing pro-social behaviors, implying that conflict resolution skills need to be taught rather than developed in natural situations. Nevertheless, Heydenberk and Heydenberk (2007) noted that giving children the opportunity to solve problems positively impacts self-confidence and independence in other areas. Thus, research shows children can solve problems independently if given time and necessary skills. Additionally, opportunities to practice problem solving independently have long-term positive effects on children, such as developing an ability to communicate feelings, adjust to new situations, and maintain relationships.

Other research has noted the need for problem-solving skills to resolve conflicts without aggression (Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Oberle & Wahl, 2000; Leff, Power, Manz, Costigan, & Nabors, 2001; Vestal & Jones, 2004). To build these skills, teachers have tried to model and discuss conflict resolution procedures in neutral moments, when



there is no conflict occurring. Dr. Montessori, an Italian physician and scientist who founded the Montessori method of education at the turn of the century, advocated for teaching social skills, including problem-solving, in neutral moments. She called them grace and courtesy lessons. The North American Montessori Teachers' Association (NAMTA) explains that timing is essential to nurture children's social skills through grace and courtesy lessons. By waiting to teach conflict resolution in neutral moments, children are less likely to feel ashamed, embarrassed, and defensive and more likely to be open to learning (Bettmann, 2015).

Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, Oberle, and Wahl (2000) taught a six-step integrative negotiation procedure to 80 kindergarteners over 18 lessons in four weeks (one per day). These lessons, similar to grace and courtesy lessons, were not done during a conflict. After training, 47% of the children used the six steps during a conflict. Thirty eight percent of the trained children remembered the steps ten weeks after the training. Similarly, Leff, Power, Manz, Costigan, and Nabors (2001) reviewed the effectiveness of five aggression prevention programs. Children who participated in The Second Step program, which used modeling and role playing, showed a decrease in physical aggression. Children who participated in the Anger Coping Program, which focused on helping boys identify their anger for an hour once a week, also showed a decrease in aggressive behavior. Both Stevhan et al. and Leff et al. found positive results from programs that systematically taught children how to solve problems. Vestal and Jones (2004) also found the implementation of a problem-solving curriculum, especially when implemented by trained teachers, resulted in more pro-social behaviors.

In addition to modeling, discussing, and role playing, research shows concrete materials can also teach problem-solving skills (Heydenberk and Heydenberk., 2007; Stevahn et al., 2000; Dettore, 2002). Heydenberk and Heydenberk's (2007) study of 71 kindergarten and first-grade children revealed the use of concrete materials, including peace journals, the Peaceful Being Project, and the conflict resolution circle, resulted in less physical and verbal aggression. The Peaceful Being Project guided children to write positive and negative social behaviors on a cardboard cutout of a man to post in the classroom as a reminder of appropriate behavior. The conflict resolution circle was a plastic ring available in the classroom for two children to hold while they resolve a conflict together. Both materials gave children a tangible reminder of strategies they learned during the training. Similarly, Stevahn et al. (2000) found that children who recited the six steps of negotiation, sequenced cards, and colored the steps were more likely to apply the strategy during a conflict. Both Heydenberk and Heydenberk and Stevahn et al. attributed the long-term application of the strategies to the concrete representations of the skills. Heydenberk and Heydenberk, however, found the same activities and materials were not successful in other grades. According to the Heydenberk and Heydenberk's study, success in conflict resolution instruction should be measured by students' ability to transfer the skills from fictional situations to real life situations. Dettore (2002) also suggested children can learn and apply problem-solving skills when they are given concrete representations of the skills, such as drawing activities. However, he connected problem-solving skills to one's ability to express emotions. According to Dettore, children who can express their feelings are more likely to exhibit less problem

behavior. Therefore, he recommended children practice expressing emotions through creative media.

### **Conclusions**

According to the research, modeling and role-playing conflict resolution in neutral moments seemed to be the most effective way to support children to solve problems independently without aggression. Modeling, discussion, and role-playing in neutral moments provides children alternative strategies to resolve conflicts when they are open to learning. Also, giving children opportunities to solve problems independently before an adult intervenes also seems to be an important factor in developing children's conflict resolution skills.

Studies that suggested the use of concrete materials, like the Peaceful Being Project, (Heydenberk and Heydenberk 2007; Stevahn et al., 2000; Dettore, 2002) all used modeling and discussion based strategies as well. Concrete representations of conflict resolution skills were never used independent of a curriculum that modeled and taught conflict resolution. Therefore, there is an agreement that role-playing or modeling is needed to teach children how to problem solve, even if tangible materials are presented to children after instruction. Studies that modeled conflict resolution (Vestal & Jones, 2004; Dettore, 2002; Leff et al. 2001, Stevahn et al., 2000; Youngstrom, Wolpaw, Kogos, Schoff, Ackerman, & Izard 2000) revealed evidence that children are able to resolve conflicts independently. Children must be provided with opportunities to solve problems without adult intervention to practice strategies they know or have been taught.

Based on the literature reviewed, further research is needed to determine if modeling conflict resolution and less adult intervention are effective when implemented

simultaneously. There is also little data regarding conflict resolution in mixed-age Montessori environments. Heydenberk and Heydenberk (2007), for example, studied classrooms of just kindergarten or first-grade children. Stevahn et al. also studied kindergarteners that were only in classes of other kindergarteners. It would be beneficial to determine if classrooms composed of several ages would respond to similar interventions.

### **Methodology**

The study included 17 participants between the ages of three and six. Each family received an assent form describing the research and any potential risks. I gave families the opportunity to opt out of the research, but no one chose to do so.

Data collection began before I introduced the interventions in order to assemble one week's worth of baseline data. The week began with a whole-group guided discussion. I invited the entire class to sit in a circle at the end of the morning. I led children in a discussion about the definition of the word conflict and then asked, "What are some ways to solve a conflict or problem between people?" I recorded all responses but excluded repetitions (Appendix D). This discussion did not include role-playing because the goal was to determine children's inventory of strategies before any targeted instruction. For the remainder of the first week, I added a tally on the Tally Form (See Appendix A) every time I observed a conflict between 8:30 and 10:30am. I also filled out the Behavior Log (See Appendix B) for each observed conflict. On the behavior log, I recorded the date, time, cause, and result of each conflict. I also noted any specific language or aggressive behaviors that were used. Lastly, I responded to three journal prompts (Appendix C) at the end of each morning. I answered the questions, "How did

the children react to conflict? What language did they use?”, “Describe children’s participation in grace and courtesy lessons”, and “Did the scripted intervention strategy seem helpful in resolving conflicts?” Because the latter two questions referred to the intervention, I only responded to the first questions during week one.

After collecting baseline data for one week, I began my intervention. I started the intervention with a whole-group grace and courtesy lesson to ensure every child received the initial presentation. I designed the lessons to be short, brief, and engaging. It was also crucial to introduce the lessons in neutral moments, when there was no conflict occurring, so children did not feel uncomfortable or shamed. For the opening lesson, the entire class gathered in a circle to role-play a specific conflict. I prepared an older child ahead of time to act out the scene with me in front of the group. I pretended to be a child who had chosen an activity while the prepared child pretended to want to do the same activity. Then, we acted out a disagreement in response to the fictional scenario. I told the child I got to the activity first and the other child explained that he had been waiting all morning to do the activity. We pretended to be frustrated and angry. After role-playing, I asked the group, “What did you notice?” Children had the opportunity to describe what they saw. Then I asked, “That was a conflict. How could we have solved it?” Children volunteered possible solutions for the fictional conflict they had just observed and then many volunteered to act it out again. With the exception of four canceled school days, I repeated the lesson with different fictional scenarios in groups of two to four children every day for the following four weeks. Fictional scenarios included two children wanting the only available spot at the snack table, a child accidentally bumping into another child, a child accidentally knocking over a someone’s work, a child hearing

something hurtful, and multiple children wanting the same spot in line. The fictional scenarios were inspired by my observations of conflict in the environment. I made note of conflict causes or triggers and then addressed them during neutral moments. I also always invited children to attend the small group grace and courtesy lessons, giving them the opportunity to decline the invitation.

In addition to the daily grace and courtesy lessons, my intervention also required me to follow a series of steps when I observed conflict naturally in the room (See Appendix E). First, I observed the conflict. I observed from a chair on the periphery of the room or spontaneously while I worked with another child. My goal was always to observe entire conflicts from afar rather than intervene and implement the remaining conflict resolution steps. However, if volume began to distract others or if the child's words or body movements predicted aggressive behavior, I would make the decision to intervene. For example, I immediately intervened when I witnessed verbal threats or motions that implied an intent to harm. If I decided to intervene, I moved to step two and approached the conflict and said "I notice there is a conflict". Then, I asked each child involved to give his point of view, I restated or summarized the problem, and supported the children to brainstorm and choose a solution. Every time I observed a conflict, including those that did not require me to intervene, I added a tally to the Tally Form (Appendix A) and filled out the Behavior Log (Appendix B). I also continued to answer the three journal prompts (Appendix C) at the end of each morning.

These interventions and data collection methods continued for four weeks, with the addition of a guided discussion at the end of the second week of intervention. I replicated the guided discussion during the first week of data collection by asking

children to name possible ways to solve a conflict. I recorded each child's response, not including repetitions.

After four weeks of implementing the daily grace and courtesy lessons in small groups and the scripted intervention steps, I collected one week of final baseline data without presenting daily grace and courtesy lessons. I continued to tally conflicts on the Tally Form (Appendix A), fill out the Behavior Log (Appendix B), and answer the journal prompts (Appendix C). I also had one final guided discussion at the end of week six and recorded children's responses to the question, "What are some ways to solve a conflict or problem between people?" (Appendix D). I did not prompt children to remember strategies we had practiced; instead, I offered longer wait-time and repeated the original question until children had volunteered all of their ideas.

### **Data Analysis**

The week before implementing the intervention, I observed a total of 18 conflicts averaging 3.6 conflicts a day. There were six conflicts on Monday, five conflicts on Friday, and two or three conflicts on the remaining days. Children verbally solved 9% of the conflicts while adults intervened in 43% of the observed conflicts. During week one of the intervention, children also participated in a guided discussion about conflict. Sixteen children attended the discussion and volunteered a total of nine responses to the question, "what are some ways to solve a conflict or problem between people?" Table 1 lists children's responses during the pre-intervention guided discussion in order of occurrence.

Table 1  
Pre - Intervention Guided Discussion Responses

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Question: What are some ways to solve a conflict or problem between people?	Statement
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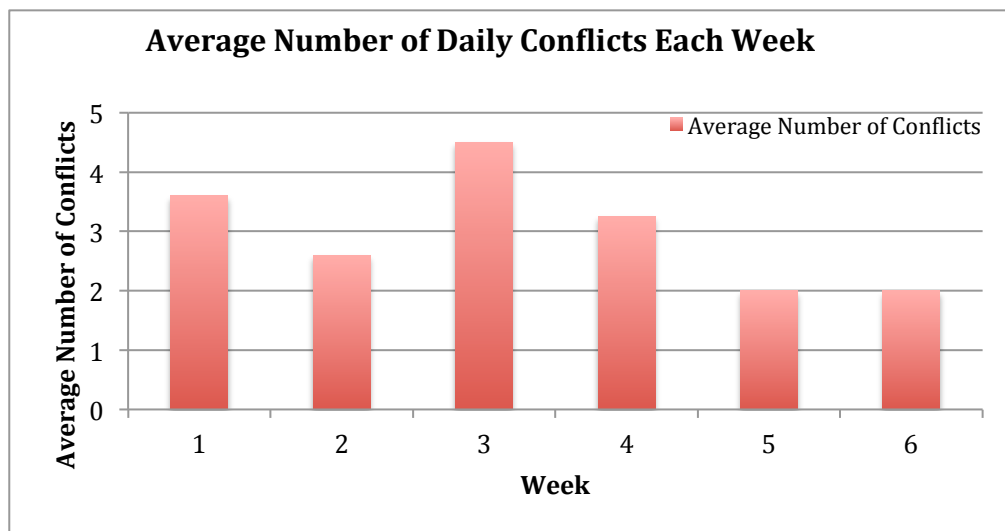
Number	
1	"Say okay and walk away"
2	"Both do it"
3	"Come back later"
4	"Share"
5	"Take a deep breath and talk it out"
6	"Find a teacher"
7	"Take a deep breath and count to 30 and wait"
8	"Find a work"
9	"Take a bath"

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*Table 1: Pre - Intervention Guided Discussion Responses*

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During week one, I also reflected on children's language and reactions during conflict. I heard children using the language "no", "he did it first", "Stop, I don't like that", and "That's my work, please put that back". I also wrote, "[children] seemed to begin solving conflicts alone and then get frustrated and come to me. They don't seem to last very long during conflict". I referred to children's lack of perseverance during conflict resolution three times during week one.



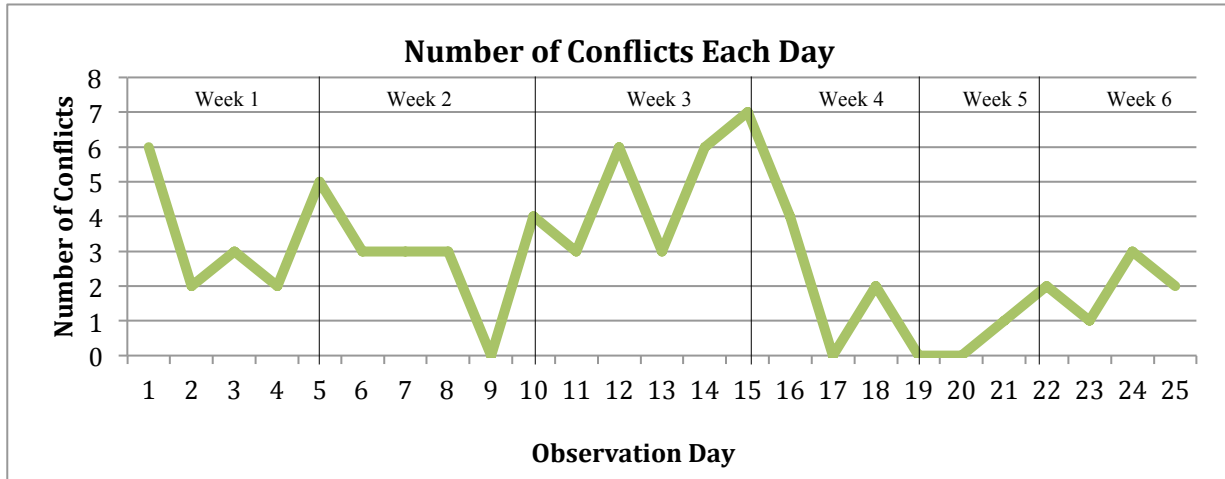
*Figure 1: Average Number of Daily Conflicts Each week*



During the intervention, the average number of conflicts per day decreased to 2.6 during week two and then increased to 4.5 during week three. Figure 1 shows the greatest number of conflicts during the intervention occurred during week three. This might be because adults were intervening less but children had not yet adjusted to the change. The number of conflicts decreased in week four; however, the week started with seven conflicts on Monday and then dropped between zero to four conflicts the remaining days. Therefore, although the most conflicts occurred during week three (18), the most conflicts that occurred in a single day occurred during week four (7). See Figure 2.

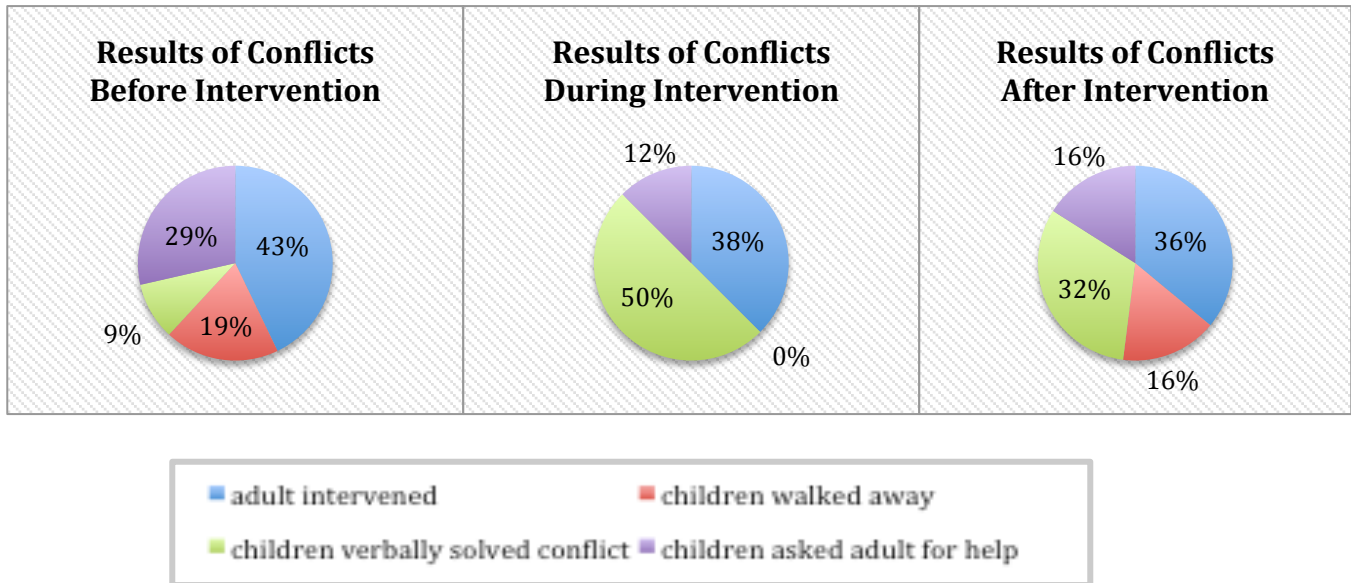
Interestingly, journal reflections of the Monday during week four reveal that the day felt calm with little conflict. In my journal entry, I reflected on two conflicts that resolved themselves and others where older children helped their peers resolve conflicts. This discrepancy shows that number of conflicts does not necessarily imply undesired behaviors that disrupt a room (e.g. yelling, hitting). Conflicts can and did occur without disrupting the environment. This might be because I became more aware of other types of conflicts during the research. During a typical morning, the volume of disruptive conflicts caught my attention; during the research, however, I was not observing because of a disruptive conflict, which let me catch types of conflict that might normally go unnoticed. Similarly, week five and the post-intervention week both had an average of two conflicts per day. Yet, according to my journal entries, week five felt tumultuous. I reflected that there were many moments where I felt I was in conflict with a child because of an incompatible goal. For example, a child damaged a material and I asked him to put it away when he did not want to put it away. My journal entry on the last day of week five

explains that I might have felt overwhelmed by conflict in my environment because of conflicts between adults and children rather than between two children.



*Figure 2: Number of Conflicts Each Day*

During the weeks of intervention, I specifically looked at how conflicts were resolved. Compared to the week before the intervention when adults helped resolve 43% of conflicts, adults only helped resolve 37% of conflicts in the middle of the intervention. At the end of the intervention, adults helped resolve 36% of conflicts. Children verbally and independently resolved 50% of conflicts during the third week and 32% during the sixth week. Children also resolved conflicts by walking away and seeking out an adult for help. As seen in Figure 3, children asked adults for help during conflict fewer times after the grace and courtesy lessons and scripted intervention were introduced.



*Figure 3: Results of Conflict Before, During, and After Intervention*

Compared to the guided discussion before the intervention, children volunteered two more responses during the mid-intervention and post-intervention guided discussions (See Table 2 and Table 3). During the mid-intervention discussion, five responses referred to the idea of waiting (e.g. waiting for a turn, waiting for a material) while more children in the post intervention discussion mentioned the idea of telling a teacher. Interestingly, I did not model, discuss, or emphasize waiting for a turn or telling a teacher during conflict.

Table 2  
Mid-Intervention Guided Discussion Responses

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Question: What are some ways to solve a conflict or problem between people?

Number	Statement
1	"If you're angry or something, just say I'm angry"
2	"You can wait for a turn"
3	"You have to wait to put things in your drawer"
4	"If you want it, just wait for it"
5	"Say, 'sorry'"
6	Could not understand child.
7	"When you're happy and someone pushes you, you can tell teachers"
8	"Walk away"
9	"If you're mad at someone, scratch your hand"
10	"Wait"
11	"Wait hundred million five pounds, wait too long"

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*Table 2: Mid - Intervention Guided Discussion Responses*

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Response number four in Table 3 most directly uses language from the grace and courtesy lessons while the remaining responses seem to reflect children's personal experiences with conflict. However, all responses volunteered during the post-intervention discussion answered the question with a problem solving strategy while the pre-intervention and mid-intervention discussions included responses that did not answer the question (e.g. "you have to wait to put things in your drawer", "both do it"). This shows an increase in children's understanding of conflict resolution strategies after the intervention, although not necessarily the strategies of negotiation and compromise that I presented.

Table 3  
Post-Intervention Guided Discussion Responses

Question: What are some ways to solve a conflict or problem between people?

Number	Statement
1	"Be separated"
2	"Walk away from each other"
3	"Don't need to get upset or hit"
4	"Talk it out and solve the problem"
5	"Say something to a teacher"
6	"Walk away and tell a teacher"
7	"Tell a friend. If it doesn't stop, then tell a teacher"
8	"Go together and maybe it will work and they will calm down"
9	"Say I got here first"
10	"Do a different work and come back"
11	"If it doesn't stop, someone has to go tell a teacher"

*Table 3: Post Intervention Guided Discussion Responses*

The behavior log and journal reflections also revealed that children used strategies that were not taught during the intervention. I grouped children's language into four main categories for the purpose of analysis: language that places blame on someone else (e.g. "He did it", "He started it"), language that includes the shouting of the word "no" at another child, the use of the word "sorry" in an apology, and language that was introduced during the intervention. For example, statements like "that makes me feel angry" or "it would make me feel better if you didn't say that" reflect strategies I modeled during grace and courtesy lessons. The scripted intervention did not include apologizing as a strategy for this age group. Children who said "sorry" to resolve a conflict must have learned the strategy from personal experiences. When children identified a conflict by using the word "conflict" (e.g. "We have a conflict", "They are

having a conflict”), I included the data in the last language category because it is a step from the scripted intervention strategy (Step 3: Say, “I notice there is a conflict”).

According to Figure 4, children used more language from grace and courtesy lessons after the intervention began and screamed the word “no” during conflict less often.

Screaming the word “no” reflects a lack of willingness to compromise or problem solve; therefore, a decrease in this strategy over the six weeks implies that children might have chosen negotiation strategies from the grace and courtesy lessons instead. However, it is important to note that I did not document exact language for every conflict. Table 5 shows examples of language in each of the four categories.

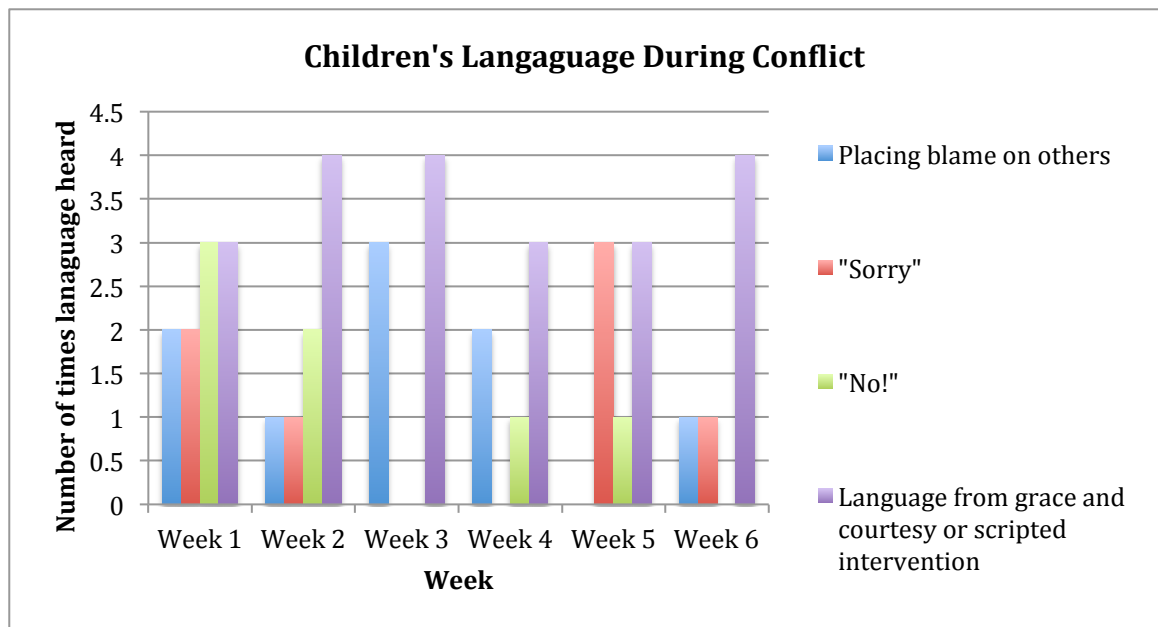


Figure 4: Children's Language During Conflict

Table 5  
Examples of four categories of language heard from children

Placing blame on others	Apology with the word "Sorry"	Screaming "No!"	Language from grace and courtesy
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			lessons or scripted intervention
“He started it”	<b>Child A:</b> “Please walk away” <b>Child B:</b> “Sorry”	“No!”	“We are having a conflict right now”
“He did it first”	<b>Adult:</b> “How could you make him feel better?” <b>Child:</b> “Sorry”	<b>Child A:</b> “Please put that back” <b>Child B:</b> “No!”	“Take a deep breath”
“It wasn’t me”	<b>Adult:</b> “How could we solve this problem?” <b>Child:</b> “Sorry!”	<b>Child A:</b> “I have a plan” <b>Child B:</b> “No!”	“Hey, there’s a conflict over there”
“O is bad, he threw the pencil at me”			<b>Child A:</b> “I’m not mad at you, I was just scared” <b>Child B:</b> “I didn’t mean to scare you” <b>Child A:</b> “It would make me feel better if you apologized” <b>Child B:</b> “I am sorry I scared you. I was just kidding” <b>Child A:</b> “That felt good”
“You’re wrong and I’m right”			
“M didn’t wash his hands but I did!”			
			“I think you’re having a conflict. Just talk it out”

*Table 5: Examples of four categories of language heard from children*

Journal entries provided information related to the successes and challenges of the interventions. I mentioned three different positive outcomes of using a scripted intervention during conflict. First, the script helped me respond to conflict without my

own emotions and bias. In other words, I was able to approach all conflicts in a more consistent, objective way. Second, the script reduced stress caused from conflicts. Rather than deciding how to intervene and wondering if I reacted appropriately, I followed the script without hesitation. Third, my reflections describe children that took on parts of the script without my support. This implies that the repetition of a consistent script helped children learn the conflict resolution process and, in turn, gradually use it on their own. On the other hand, the script was time consuming. I wrote about how much time it took to follow the steps a total of four times during weeks two, three, and four.

According to my journal reflections, grace and courtesy lessons felt challenging with three and four year olds. I used the word “confused” three times in my journals to describe children during grace and courtesy lessons. This might be because of the abstract nature of fictional conflicts or the paradox of acting out typically undesired behaviors (e.g. accidentally bumping into someone, getting angry). I also noted in my journal entries that I forgot to do grace and courtesy lessons on three different days. When I forgot to do the lessons in the morning, I would do them in the afternoon. On days that I did grace and courtesy lessons in the afternoon rather than the morning, conflicts averaged 2.3 per day. This is similar to days where grace and courtesy was performed in the morning; therefore, this data does not reveal any correlation between timing of lessons and number of conflicts.

I also reflected that many children seemed to have an inventory of conflict resolution strategies and were able to solve fictional problems during neutral grace and courtesy lessons; however, some children were not able to apply the skills during real conflict when they experienced intense emotions. For example, one child suggested



taking a deep breath to calm down during a grace and courtesy lesson but when he experienced conflict, he cried and screamed. I also noted that children had different levels of problem solving skills. When a child who could apply conflict resolution strategies experienced conflict with a child who could not, the conflict seemed to escalate. In one conflict, child A said, "I have a plan" while the other child repeatedly screamed "no!". I reflected that conflicts seemed to be resolved most efficiently when the two children had similar conflict resolution abilities.

### **Summary**

From day one of the pre-intervention week to the last day of the post intervention week, number of conflicts per day decreased by 55.5 percent. However, this percent change does not reflect the spike of conflicts during weeks three and four or the changes in children's language or understanding of conflict. My journal reflections provided the most information about the success of the intervention. Although number of conflicts increased and decreased irregularly during the intervention, children used more grace and courtesy language and more conflict resolution strategies after the intervention. Adults also intervened less and experienced less stress during conflict. However, young children seemed confused during grace and courtesy lessons and the scripted intervention was time consuming. Older children, on the other hand, enjoyed acting out fictional scenarios and could independently articulate solutions to most conflicts. Children also seemed to understand conflict resolution strategies in neutral moments but had a difficult time calming down to apply the strategies during real moments of conflict. This research aimed to change the way children approached conflict through grace and courtesy lessons and a scripted intervention strategy that reduced unnecessary adult intervention. The

behavior log shows adults did intervene less and children used productive conflict resolution language more often.

### **Action Plan**

This study set out to determine the effect of grace and courtesy lessons and more thoughtful adult intervention on children's responses to conflict. Grace and courtesy lessons are brief, engaging lessons that give children language to use in social situations. While children used more grace and courtesy language after the intervention, data also showed children had a large inventory of conflict resolution strategies before the intervention even started. The study showed that I perceived the environment to have more conflicts than there actually were. While I felt the room was chaotic before the intervention, data shows that the feeling of the room does not reflect number of conflicts. The study revealed that conflict does not always imply a loud, chaotic room. In fact, some conflicts and their resolutions can be a sign of social growth or maturity. For example, if a child decides to confront another child about something he feels is unfair rather than just walk away, he is developing a sense of justice. Such a conflict might result in children having a meaningful conversation about their opinions or interests, not necessarily a disruptive argument. This realization sheds a positive light on conflict and should alter the way teachers think about and support children in conflict. My journal entries also suggest that my environment was not experiencing as much conflict as I initially perceived. This was an important take away for me because I can use this as a reference point going forward. Even when I felt the children were constantly in conflict, they actually used a lot of productive conflict resolution strategies and language.

While number of conflicts did not necessarily decrease, the journal reflections show that the daily grace and courtesy lessons, guided discussions, and scripted intervention strategy helped me feel less stress related to conflict. I also reported being able to respond objectively and consistently to conflicts. Therefore, although the interventions felt time consuming, they made conflict resolution feel more manageable. If teachers can approach conflict with less tension and anxiety, they will have more mental space to support children in the moment. In addition, the repetitive nature of the intervention supported children to gradually take on the strategies themselves. Because the steps were always the same, children began to reflexively identify a conflict, listen to everyone's perspectives, and agree on a solution without seeking an adult. This eventually reduced my workload, which also alleviated conflict related stress in the environment.

While I would continue to give daily grace and courtesy lessons and respond to conflict with the scripted intervention, I would approach data collection a bit differently. Rather than eliminating repeated responses during the guided discussions, I would record all responses. I could use this data to determine the most common conflict resolution strategies among the group and to compare children's language. I would also prepare for grace and courtesy lessons in a different way. Rather than presenting the lessons whenever I had time, I might schedule grace and courtesy lessons to hold myself accountable and remember them each day. I would also intentionally choose the group of children to include a variety of ages. This change will provide children with role models to deepen their understanding of strategies. Planning the groups of children would also ensure that every child received equal number of grace and courtesy lessons.

The study was limited to 17 children and the intervention only took place for four weeks. Changes in children's responses to conflict might have been more extreme if the intervention took place for a longer period of time. The small group of children also does not allow generalization of the results. I recommend implementing the intervention for at least six weeks and having a control group of children.

Journal reflections and the observations logs reveal the scripted intervention strategy could not be used until children were calm. Many conflicts led to children crying or screaming, which prevented them from speaking or listening to their peers. Although children typically identified and role-played conflict resolution strategies in neutral moments, they were too emotional to apply the strategies to real conflicts. Therefore, this study suggests that further research is needed to determine effective ways for children to calm down during conflict. Because conflict resolution cannot happen until children are composed and ready to negotiate, the scripted intervention might need to begin with a step that aims to calm children down before proceeding. Further research is also needed to determine the most effective amount of time for adults to wait before intervening. The scripted intervention included an observation step, but it would be helpful to have more information about specific lengths of time to wait before it becomes detrimental.

The study shed light on the positive nature of conflict as well as the dichotomy between teacher's perceptions of their environment and reality. In this case, I perceived my environment to have many more conflicts than it did. In addition, the study showed how children's responses to conflict can change when they are taught strategies in neutral moments and are given the opportunity to practice the strategies during real conflict. I taught children strategies through grace and courtesy lessons and gave children time to

apply them in real life by following an intervention script. The script started with observation to ensure that adults only intervened when safety was threatened. As a result, children solved more conflicts independently and used language from grace and courtesy lessons more often.

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## Appendix A

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Date:	# of conflicts	# of aggressive behaviors



Appendix B

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time	Cause of Conflict	Result of Conflict	Language Used	Aggressive Behaviors Observed <small>(kicking, hitting, pushing, biting)</small>
		<input type="checkbox"/> children solved the conflict verbally without an adult <input type="checkbox"/> children became physically aggressive <input type="checkbox"/> children became verbally aggressive <input type="checkbox"/> children walked away <input type="checkbox"/> teacher intervened <input type="checkbox"/> other:		
		<input type="checkbox"/> children solved the conflict verbally without an adult <input type="checkbox"/> children became physically aggressive <input type="checkbox"/> children became verbally aggressive <input type="checkbox"/> children walked away <input type="checkbox"/> teacher intervened <input type="checkbox"/> other:		
		<input type="checkbox"/> children solved the conflict verbally without an adult <input type="checkbox"/> children became physically aggressive <input type="checkbox"/> children became verbally aggressive <input type="checkbox"/> children walked away <input type="checkbox"/> teacher intervened <input type="checkbox"/> other:		
		<input type="checkbox"/> children solved the conflict verbally without an adult <input type="checkbox"/> children became physically aggressive <input type="checkbox"/> children became verbally aggressive <input type="checkbox"/> children walked away <input type="checkbox"/> teacher intervened <input type="checkbox"/> other:		

## Appendix C

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Observation Journal Prompts (to be completed each day in a separate journal):**

1. How did the children react to conflict? What language did they use?
2. Describe children's participation in grace and courtesy lessons.
3. Did the scripted intervention strategy seem helpful in resolving conflicts?

### Appendix D

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Date of discussion: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of children present: \_\_\_\_\_

Ideas presented by children when asked, "What are some ways to solve a conflict or problem between people?" during guided discussion:

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20	

Other remarks:

## Appendix E

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Scripted intervention steps:

1. Observe.
2. Only decide to intervene if volume begins to distract others or if words/body movements predict aggressive behavior (kicking, pushing, or hitting motions toward a child, verbal threats).
3. If deciding to intervene, approach conflict and say, “I notice there is a conflict”.
4. Ask each child involved to give his or her point of view.
5. Restate or summarize the problem.
6. Support the children to brainstorm and choose a solution.