

Exploring Peer Conflict Types and Resolution Strategies in Early Childhood Play

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Abstract

Children's play is a critical avenue for promoting social development and interpersonal skills. Peer conflicts frequently occur during play, which, while potentially impacting emotional regulation and social skills, also provide valuable opportunities for learning and practicing these skills. Therefore, effectively managing peer conflicts is essential. This study aims to provide kindergarten teachers with targeted guidance for addressing peer conflicts during children's play, with the goal of promoting children's social and emotional development. To achieve this, the study categorizes common conflict types, including resource disputes, power struggles, and emotional outbursts. Based on these classifications, a range of conflict resolution strategies is proposed, such as negotiation, attention redirection, and rule enforcement. These strategies help teachers effectively guide children in resolving conflicts, enhancing their social skills and emotional regulation.

Keywords

Children's play; peer conflict; conflict resolution strategies; social development.

1. Introduction

Early childhood is a critical phase for the development of social skills, emotional regulation, and interpersonal abilities [1]. During this period, children gradually learn how to interact with others, understand their feelings, and adapt to behavioral norms in group settings through various forms of play. Play, as an essential part of a child's daily social life, serves as a primary means for them to explore the external world and acquire basic social skills [2]. Moreover, play fosters social cognition, helping children better understand others' perspectives and enhancing their emotional regulation [3, 4].

While play provides rich learning opportunities for young children, conflicts between peers are inevitable [5]. These conflicts often arise from differences in resource allocation, rule interpretation, or power dynamics, reflecting their social immaturity. However, conflicts not only pose challenges but also offer important opportunities for children to learn problem-solving and understand social norms [5]. Through experiencing and managing conflicts, children gradually acquire negotiation, sharing, and problem-solving skills, while enhancing their emotional regulation [6].

This study provides a theoretical analysis and systematic exploration of the types and causes of peer conflicts in young children's play, followed by a series of strategies for conflict resolution. These strategies, such as negotiation and emotional management, empower children to autonomously manage conflicts under teacher guidance. Furthermore, the study discusses how timely teacher intervention can effectively guide conflict resolution, fostering children's social development and emotional regulation. Thus, this research offers new perspectives for responding to peer conflict in early childhood education.

2. Types and Causes of Peer Conflict

2.1. Resource Competition Conflict

Resource competition conflicts are a common phenomenon in early childhood games, typically triggered by competition over limited material resources, such as toys or books. Due to the developmental stage of their cognition and emotional regulation, children often find it challenging to grasp the concepts of sharing or taking turns. According to Piaget and Cook [7], young children tend to view objects as personal possessions, making it difficult for them to understand the social value of sharing. Brownell, Iesue [8] further explain that through interactions with peers, children develop a sense of self and social identity by asserting control over or sharing resources. This type of conflict reflects their developmental stage, as children attempt to explore the roles that resources play in social relationships, making the competition over objects both a simple material struggle and a deeper process of developing social understanding.

Power and control conflicts are frequently observed in group play among young children, especially when a child attempts to dominate the game, set rules, or direct peers. These conflicts often reflect the growing autonomy of children and their desire to establish social status within a group. According to Erikson [9], psychosocial development theory, children in the stage of autonomy versus shame begin to form a sense of independence and demonstrate their abilities by controlling the course of play. As they become aware of their ability to influence others, children often assert control over game rules and roles to validate their dominance. However, conflicts can arise when peers resist this control or challenge the child's authority.

2.2. Power and Control Conflicts

Shantz [5] points out that conflicts involving power and control not only highlight issues of authority and dominance but also represent children's exploration of social dynamics and group norms. Hawley [10] social dominance theory adds that children, through these conflicts, seek not only to control resources but also to gain peer recognition by asserting dominance in social interactions. When other children challenge this authority, the conflict can escalate, affecting the development of peer relationships. Moreover, such conflicts reveal cognitive progress in children's understanding of social norms and power relations. According to Piaget [11] moral development theory, children gradually learn to respect rules and cooperate through play. However, when desires for power clash with rule interpretation or enforcement, the result is often an unresolved struggle for control.

2.3. Emotional Conflicts

Emotional conflicts among young children typically arise when they struggle to regulate emotions during heightened states of frustration, disappointment, or anger. Due to the developmental stage of their emotional regulation abilities, young children often find it challenging to manage intense emotions, leading to conflict as an outlet for their distress [12]. Gross [13] emotional regulation model suggests that individuals use strategies like situation modification, attention redirection, and cognitive reappraisal to modulate emotional responses. However, young children often lack these advanced regulatory skills, which can result in expressions of dissatisfaction such as crying, aggression, or withdrawal when faced with setbacks during play. This highlights the core issue of emotional conflicts: children's responses to frustration and their underdeveloped ability to manage emotional disturbances.

2.4. Rule-Based Conflicts

Rule-based conflicts occur when children experience disagreements about the rules or role assignments in games, often stemming from differences in cognitive development. According to Piaget [14] children development theory, children begin to understand rules during the

concrete operational stage, but their thinking remains somewhat egocentric. development theory, children begin to understand rules during the concrete operational stage, but their thinking remains somewhat egocentric. As a result, their understanding of rules can differ from that of their peers. Conflicts arise when one child insists on their interpretation of the rules, while another has a different understanding or refuses to comply. Additionally, differing views on rule flexibility contribute to these conflicts [15]. Younger children tend to follow rules rigidly, while older ones exhibit more flexibility, leading to potential disputes when consensus cannot be reached in group play.

2.5. Social Exclusion Conflicts

Social exclusion conflicts occur when children feel excluded, rejected, or isolated during group play. These conflicts typically arise as children explore social interactions, especially while seeking a sense of belonging within a peer group [16, 17]. According to Sullivan [18] social development theory, the need for belonging is crucial for young children's emotional security. When excluded, children may experience intense emotional reactions [19], such as anger, sadness, or anxiety, which are closely linked to their sense of self-worth [20]. Social exclusion often stems from differences in personality, a lack of social skills, or pre-existing group hierarchies, where certain children may hold leadership roles, while others follow. This type of conflict not only reflects emotional responses but can have lasting effects on a child's self-esteem. Long-term exclusion may damage social confidence, further hindering the child's ability to develop social competence.

2.6. Misunderstanding Conflicts

Misunderstanding conflicts typically arise when young children misinterpret their peers' actions or words. Due to their underdeveloped cognitive and language abilities, young children often struggle to correctly understand social cues, especially in situations involving unintentional actions or statements. This misinterpretation can lead them to perceive behaviors as hostile or offensive [21]. Language, as emphasized by Vygotsky, plays a crucial role in children's cognitive and social development, helping them internalize social rules [22]. However, when language skills lag behind social needs, misunderstandings—and consequently, conflicts—become more frequent. For example, a child offering to share a toy may be misunderstood as attempting to take it away, leading to a conflict. Such conflicts reflect young children's developmental limitations in interpreting social interactions and their difficulty in regulating emotions.

2.7. Competitive Conflicts

Competitive conflicts are common among young children during games or contests, especially when winning or losing is involved. Children's strong desire to win or their inability to accept defeat can lead to tensions with peers. Astington and Jenkins [21] noted that children often express emotions through intense behaviors when they experience loss or perceive unfairness, reflecting their emotional regulation and problem-solving skills. In competition, success boosts children's sense of self-worth, while failure may trigger frustration. The desire to validate their abilities through winning is often tied to their social status among peers.

Moreover, the nature of peer relationships significantly influences competitive conflicts. Children may resort to impulsive actions if they feel excluded or treated unfairly during competitions, using these behaviors to defend their rights or express dissatisfaction. Competitive conflicts are not solely about winning but also involve maintaining and adjusting social relationships. Moderate competition can be beneficial, helping children learn to cope with defeat and develop emotional regulation skills. However, excessive competition can lead to tension within the peer group, negatively impacting children's self-esteem and confidence.

3. Strategies for Addressing Peer Conflicts in Early Childhood Play

When children encounter peer conflicts during play, they can employ various strategies to resolve disputes. The choice of strategy depends on their cognitive development, emotional regulation skills, and teacher guidance. By using effective conflict resolution techniques, children can engage in more positive interactions with peers, enhancing their social skills and emotional regulation abilities. Mastering these strategies not only helps children resolve immediate conflicts but also lays a crucial foundation for their future social behaviors and interpersonal relationships.

3.1. Negotiation Strategy

Negotiation strategies play a crucial role in helping young children resolve peer conflicts during play. These strategies enable children to effectively express their needs and viewpoints through both verbal and non-verbal communication. In conflict situations, children learn to clearly articulate their own opinions through negotiation while also listening to others' ideas, ultimately reaching a consensus. Negotiation not only fosters the development of children's communication skills but also enhances their social abilities, including skills in communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution. During the negotiation process, children are not just expressing their own needs; they also learn to understand and consider the feelings and perspectives of their peers. This communication process helps children cultivate empathy, enabling them to think from others' points of view and be willing to make compromises to achieve a shared goal. Additionally, negotiation provides children with an effective alternative strategy to handle conflicts, preventing direct escalation or aggressive behaviors. In early childhood, conflicts often arise from issues such as resource sharing or role assignment, and negotiation offers a peaceful way to resolve these disputes. Through negotiation, children come to understand that even without conflict, they can achieve their goals through communication and cooperation.

3.2. Attention Redirection Strategy

Redirecting attention during children's peer conflicts in play is not merely a means of providing immediate emotional relief; it also serves as an important emotional regulation strategy that helps children gradually learn to self-regulate and manage conflict situations. The core of attention redirection lies in guiding children to focus on new and engaging activities, thereby shifting their focus away from the current conflict and preventing further emotional opposition and unnecessary escalation. For example, when children are involved in a disagreement, teachers can quickly intervene and suggest new, interesting activities such as building with blocks, outdoor play, or creative drawing. These activities not only divert children's attention but also provide opportunities for hands-on tasks or cooperative activities, helping them shift their energy away from the conflict and re-engage in positive experiences.

The strategy of redirecting attention can also enhance children's emotional expression and management skills in social contexts. Children gradually learn how to control their emotional responses in tense situations, thereby avoiding aggressive or withdrawn behavior due to emotional outbursts. Furthermore, when implementing this strategy, teachers can create interactive activities that encourage children to rebuild positive cooperative relationships with their peers. For instance, teachers can organize group activities or team games, allowing children who were involved in a conflict to work together again in new activities, facilitating relationship repair in a relaxed environment.

3.3. Rule Guidance Strategy

The key to the rule-guidance strategy lies in establishing and clearly explaining the rules of games and activities beforehand to reduce conflicts arising from misunderstandings of those

rules. This strategy aims to foster a sense of order and behavioral norms among children, helping them understand what behaviors are appropriate in group settings and which should be avoided. Clear rules not only provide specific behavioral guidelines but also create a structured environment that mitigates misunderstandings and emotional tension resulting from unclear expectations.

Before games begin, teachers should communicate the rules thoroughly, ensuring children understand and accept them. Given the different levels of cognitive development in children, teachers can tailor their explanations according to the age group. For younger children, clear and concise language with repeated reinforcement is essential, while older children can engage in discussions and questions to grasp the deeper meanings of rules. This interaction not only helps them comprehend the rules but also fosters a sense of responsibility.

Teachers can also discuss potential conflict scenarios in advance, making children aware of the importance of rules in real situations. Role-playing or simulating conflict scenarios can enhance the practical aspect of this strategy. For example, teachers could create scenarios where multiple children want the same toy or have different interpretations of game rules. By guiding the children to resolve conflicts through adherence to rules, they can experience first-hand how rules help maintain order in games, reinforcing their importance in group activities.

4. The Role of Teachers in Managing Peer Conflict During Children's Play

4.1. Observation and Guidance

In children's conflict situations, teachers play an active role as guides and mediators rather than mere observers. They must stay vigilant, paying attention to subtle behavioral changes that might signal potential conflicts. Using Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" theory, teachers provide support when children are unable to resolve conflicts independently, helping them learn new conflict resolution strategies. The intervention should focus on guidance, not force, encouraging children to actively participate in the process. This approach gradually enhances children's ability to independently manage and resolve conflicts.

For example, during a resource-based conflict, teachers can guide children to reach a consensus through discussion and negotiation, demonstrating how taking turns or sharing resources can resolve disputes. This not only helps children understand the value of cooperation but also provides them with practical conflict resolution methods. Additionally, teachers can use role-playing activities to reinforce conflict resolution skills. By simulating conflict situations and assigning children the role of mediator, they can practice handling disputes, boosting their confidence and social skills in everyday interactions.

4.2. Establishing Rules and Order

In daily teaching, teachers should guide children to gradually establish clear rules and a sense of order in games. Through this process, children's moral understanding shifts from egocentricity to rule-based thinking. By setting behavioral boundaries during games, children can begin to comprehend social norms and internalize them. Creating a structured environment helps children feel safe and reduces unnecessary conflicts. At the same time, encouraging autonomy within these boundaries promotes independence, helping children recognize the importance of rules and gradually adopt them as self-regulated behaviors. For example, teachers can establish a "Conflict Resolution Corner" or "Discussion Area," providing a space for children to express and resolve issues. This method encourages children to think critically when facing problems, guiding them toward solutions through discussion and negotiation, which enhances problem-solving skills. In this space, under teacher guidance, children can verbalize their concerns and collaboratively find solutions. This approach improves their social skills and fosters reflection on conflicts, helping children understand the consequences of their

actions and reducing future conflicts. Clear rules create a structured, nurturing environment that promotes comprehensive development in rule awareness, social skills, and autonomy.

5. Conclusion

Peer conflicts are a common occurrence in children's play. This study analyzed the causes of peer conflicts and corresponding strategies for resolution, revealing various underlying factors. Given children's early cognitive and emotional development stages, conflicts often stem from issues such as resource disputes, rule disagreements, power struggles, emotional outbursts, and misunderstandings. These conflicts, while highlighting developmental gaps, provide valuable learning opportunities for problem-solving, emotional regulation, and understanding social rules. Teachers play a key role as facilitators, helping children manage conflicts through strategies like negotiation, distraction, rule guidance, emotional management, and external intervention. Resolving these conflicts not only maintains a harmonious play environment but also contributes to children's social and emotional development. In future educational practice, teachers should continue to support children's social interactions, ensuring richer social and emotional experiences during play.

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