

## A Closer Look at Toddler Conflict

by Trice Atchison

Conflict is inherently distressing for all but the thickest-skinned among us, that subset of people who seem, in contrast, to be enlivened by conflict. Perhaps humanity can achieve a healthy balance – one that can be learned beginning in early childhood – in which conflict is neither eschewed nor ignited, but instead met with understanding and finesse. In this paper, I hope to shed some light on this age-old challenge and, perhaps, offer some tools that may help us and our children more successfully deal with this inevitable aspect of life.

*A typical progression: We have a child, and our hearts are melted. We're vulnerable, and so is our newborn. We try our best to shelter that innocent little one, who grows fast and soon becomes a part of the wider world. We bring him to a playgroup, the park or a library readalong. The other new parents seem friendly enough, if also a little nervous, and the children happily observe and participate in the activities. This is healthy, this is good, this is peace, this is community.*

*And then a little boy, not more than two and for no apparent reason, reaches out to pull a tuft of our own child's hair. Hard! Unprovoked! Our child yells in protest. We are shocked and dismayed. This is unacceptable. We want a perfect, conflict-free world for our deeply loved child. No hair pulling, no hitting, no teasing, no excluding! These thoughts cloud the present moment, and we lose all perspective.*

New parents often seek a utopian experience for their child, and this can be especially true among parents drawn to Waldorf education. Many parents speak of the visceral reaction they had the first time they ever walked into a Waldorf early childhood classroom: the peach-blossom lazured walls, the simple cloth dolls and wooden toys, the fresh flowers on the seasonal table, and the smell of bread baking in the oven. Parents rejoice: *Yes, this is it! I've found a true paradise for my sweet child.*

I, too, was enthralled with the goodness and beauty I sensed the first time I walked into a Waldorf early childhood classroom, and knew that this was the setting I wanted for my child. I still hold these positive views about a form of education that is healing, inspiring, developmentally appropriate and joyful. The difference now is that I know from experience that conflict and struggle also occur within those pastel-colored walls.

As parents, we can strive to offer our children valuable experiences we may have enjoyed, or missed, as children, but we cannot always surround them with perfect harmony. Even if we could achieve this end, we would not be serving our child's best interests. As Barbara Ehrensaft says in *Spoiling Childhood: How Well-Meaning Parents Are Giving Children Too Much, But Not What They Need*, "In human relationships, the act of reparation, making good on something that did not initially go well, is far better for character building than providing our children with a conflictfree, idyllic, 'perfect' childhood."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes there's trouble in paradise. What's more, this trouble is normal, and a valuable learning experience for all of us as we help children learn how to navigate their way through conflict. To do this, we must become more aware of the feelings and preconceptions we bring to conflicts that we and our children encounter, and strive to be more objective and present in regard to whatever manifests in the moment.

Certain trends in parenting can make this objectivity toward, and acceptance of, conflict all the more difficult to achieve: the blurring of boundaries between parent and child, especially common during the early years; an overzealous desire on the part of parents to offer their children an "optimal" childhood; and an overblown fear of conflict of any kind in the name of peace. In these ways, parents may be hampering their children in learning how to co-exist with others, as with the child, Richard, described here:

*Pamela and Gordon believed that a crying child meant a failing parent. As a small baby, their son, Richard, was given a warm and enriched environment. He had two parents who anticipated his every need and quietly removed obstacles from his course before he ever knew they were in his way...He had a bucolic and blissful first couple of years... Richard smiled most of the time ...*

*"But then it was time for Richard to attend preschool. Nirvana quickly turned to purgatory. Pamela and Gordon [had] failed to present their son with the 'gradual failures' that would allow him to function in the world. ...[Richard's] conflict-free home life existed in stark contrast to his new battlefield at school. Soon the battles were carried home... In the concerted effort to keep Richard satisfied and gratified, Richard was deprived of the basic tools that would help him cope in the world – patience, waiting his turn, dealing with frustration, problem solving, hoping for something better."<sup>3</sup>*

The unhappy situation described above begins in infancy, with the parents quietly clearing Richard's path of all obstacles. He never has to experience frustration or exert himself to solve a problem on his own – even one as simple as retrieving a toy he has flung out of reach.

As teachers and parents, we can help children build character and important life skills by, ourselves, accepting conflict as a normal part of toddlerhood, childhood and adult life. The RIE (Resources for Infant Educators) approach to young children is an example of a practice that embraces conflict by discouraging parents and caregivers from intervening too soon in a misguided effort to smooth a baby's path of obstacles. As RIE founder Magda Gerber writes in *Your Self-Confident Baby: How to encourage your child's natural abilities – from the very start*, "To respect your child is to create a little distance so that you refrain from interfering with her experience of encountering life...RIE's respectful approach encourages a child's authenticity, or genuineness."<sup>4</sup> In this light, creating a frustration-free environment for a young child is a form of disrespect, and one that alienates the child from his or her truest self.

Waldorf early childhood teachers often use redirection as an approach to resolving conflicts among children. When Sally and Sammy are each insisting on using a child's broom at the same time, the teacher might get the dustpan and brush and show one of the children how to sweep up the dirt, or she might see to it that there are multiples of popular toys. Or she may encourage Sammy to bake some muffins in the play kitchen. This occurs without a long speech about the importance of sharing, or a dictate that each child must take a turn of a certain length with the broom before switching. Sarah Baldwin, author of *Nurturing Children and Families: One Model of a Parent/Child Program in a Waldorf School*, specifically reminds parents to be aware that children this young often simply cannot share, and recommends that parents and teachers work together to redirect children.<sup>5</sup>

A strong, healthy daily rhythm can do much to help prevent or minimize conflicts by allowing the children to know what to expect, to transition smoothly from one activity to the next, and to avoid becoming overstimulated or bored (conditions that can prompt conflict). Waldorf early childhood teacher Barbara Patterson, in *Beyond the Rainbow Bridge: Nurturing our children from birth to seven*, says, "Like a heartbeat or the rising and setting of the sun, our classroom rhythms hold children in a secure balance. Our outer activity comes to meet whatever wells up within the children as we move through repetitive daily and weekly rhythms."<sup>6</sup> Ronald G. Morrish, author of *Secrets of Discipline: 12 keys for raising responsible children*, supports this idea. He describes the need for children to have a healthy dose of rhythm and routine in their lives in order to avoid feeling off-balance and unharmonious: "These days, many [children] have to think their way through every part of the day. Many parents no longer stress routines and nothing is predictable. Children have to stay alert and deal with constant change...Too often, we forget that children struggle to get through days like this the same as we do. They also become agitated, irritable and unproductive."<sup>7</sup>

Other wise strategies effective in minimizing conflicts include a hearty mid-morning snack (heading off prob-

lems that can arise from simple hunger), and encouraging early bedtimes and daily naps to help ensure that children are well-rested. It is up to us as adults to create an atmosphere that, as far as possible, fosters peace and purposefulness – and, of course, to model peace ourselves. A well-rested, well-fed, assured and engaged child will tend to play well by herself and co-exist well with others. But, as we know, even in such ideal circumstances, conflicts crop up. Children bring with them varying levels of coping skills from day to day; these can be due to simple overtiredness or other temporary factors, constitutional differences, and issues children may be absorbing from their family life, such as parents' marital difficulties or job pressures.

Patterson suggests various ways to deal with aggression and conflict in the classroom: A child who bites can be given a large piece of apple or carrot and must sit beside the teacher to eat it. "We bite the carrot, not our friends." For a child who scratches, bring out the healing basket and trim the child's nails. "Kittens scratch, but not children." A child who spits may be taken to the bathroom to spit into the toilet.<sup>8</sup>

Patterson also recommends listening carefully to children as they describe what happened in a conflict with another child, noting that a child who feels sincerely heard seems better able to let go of the conflict and move on. She also helps children struggling to enter social play in finding creative ways to become involved, increasing the chances that the other children will respond favorably to a new playmate. For example, a child might be encouraged to knock on a neighbor's "door," basket in hand, to say that she's having visitors for tea and would like to borrow some dishes, as opposed to crashing in on the dish hoarders, accusing them of being unfair.<sup>9</sup>

RIE practitioners advocate more specifically and directly guiding children engaged in conflict. First, however, children must have a chance to work out conflicts on their own – with just enough adult help as is needed to lead them through an impasse. In this way (as with the infant trying to reach a toy on his own) children's capabilities and competence are acknowledged as they gradually gain mastery in dealing with their physical world and social relationships. Gerber says:

I believe in letting children struggle over a toy as long as neither one is getting hurt or hasn't reached a point where he is past his limit of coping with the situation. Struggle is part of life, all aspects of life. There is a famous Hungarian stage play called *The Tragedy of Man*. In one scene God looks down and speaks to Adam and Eve, saying, "Struggle and keep hoping."<sup>10</sup>

Gerber's quote brings to mind images of a woman laboring through childbirth, a chick pecking its way out of a shell, a sperm's journey during conception – all examples of rich and meaningful struggle.

A RIE-based article by Denise Da Ros and Beverly Kovach, "Assisting Toddlers and Caregivers During Conflict Resolutions: Interactions That Promote Socialization," offers specific guidelines for caregivers in dealing with toddler conflict and in exploring one's own inner responses to conflict in terms of how they might influence the way a caregiver chooses to intervene.<sup>11</sup> The first step is quiet observation, maintaining an open and non-judgmental attitude. Moving in close to the conflict and remaining at the children's eye level, the caregiver watches and waits, unless, of course, a child's safety is at stake (all the while ready to intercept any hitting gesture). The caregiver may then describe to the children what she sees ("I see that you have the sheep, Thomas, and that Sarah wants it, too."). The caregiver, curbing her desire to quickly solve the problem out of a need to erase her own discomfort, waits to see whether the children, thus acknowledged, still need to struggle. She offers just enough involvement, if any, to help the children solve the problem themselves. Often the simple act of moving in close, or of simply stating to the children what is happening, is enough to dispell the conflict. The caregiver stays nearby until the conflict is resolved, remaining available to comfort either child, and modeling gentleness toward both the "aggressor" and the "victim." The caregiver continues to verbalize what she sees happening until the toddlers disengage.<sup>12</sup> Da Ros and Kovach conclude that "Adults' ways of relating and responding during toddler conflict will affect the immediate outcome of toddler

problem-solving. When and how much adults should intervene, and the kinds of strategy they select, will affect the authenticity and competence of the toddlers who are in the adult's care."<sup>13</sup>

Sharifa Oppenheimer, in an article entitled, "Creating Your 'Family Culture'" has these recommendations for conflict resolution: "1) Use the same tone of voice you use for 'here's the towel.' Simple, informative, clear. 2) Rarely is there a situation in which there is a true 'victim' and 'aggressor.'" There are two sides to every child's disagreement, and you need to know both. 3) Keep it simple. A few words used skillfully are far more effective than the best lecture on justice and equality."<sup>14</sup>

As Gerber, with her trademark common sense, states, "If either child's emotions reach the boiling point and his behavior falls apart, or either child is intent on engaging in aggressively hurtful behavior like hitting or biting, you may decide to separate them. You can say, 'I don't want either of you to get hurt, and it looks like one of you might. I'm going to separate you now.'"<sup>15</sup>

The Da Ros and Kovach article was especially helpful to me in practically dealing with classroom conflicts that occurred during the parent-toddler classes I taught at the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School this past spring. The class consisted of eight to ten toddler-parent pairs each day, and the children were ages one-and-a-half to three. I practiced the steps outlined above, and also took a closer look at my own deep discomfort with conflict, and with the mistaken idea that, ideally, there wouldn't be any in the classroom, or that a "good teacher" knows how to remove conflict in a snap. The insight to see conflicts as necessary and educational helped me to become more effective in assisting the children and the parents.

At the first signs of conflict, I would move in closer. When warranted, I "reported" to the children, in simple language, what I saw. I was amazed at how affirming and calming these steps could be for the children. At times, redirection still felt like the more appropriate response – but I also could more clearly observe how parents' overly enthusiastic attempts at redirection often backfired and, indeed, did not adequately acknowledge the child's feelings of frustration, inevitably leading to further frustration and conflict. (Perhaps the child thinks, "Why is she asking me to make muffins? Can't she see that I really want that broom?") With empathy, I also was able to observe how uncomfortable some of the parents were with conflict in the classroom, particularly when their own child was involved in it.

I began to tell "victims," in a matter-of-fact manner, that they could say "No," or "I don't like that," when another child was invading their space. Years ago, I read a magazine article by a rape survivor who wrote about having been raised to be a "good girl" who never said no or wished to hurt anybody's feelings by refuting them, setting limits, or "making a stink." These learned habits of so-called "niceness" were the conditions that led to her rape. This harkens back to Gerber's goal of authenticity. It is simply false, unnatural and even dangerous to smile apologetically and remain accommodating when someone is violating your personal space.

I wrote a letter on the topic of toddler conflict to the parents, and gave them a copy of the Da Ros and Kovach article. Over the next weeks I saw the parents (and myself) develop greater comfort and skill in observing conflicts in process, allowing them some time to be resolved, and quietly acknowledging what was transpiring when a conflict was in effect. Of course, the children and parents were also by this time more familiar with me, each other, the classroom and the routine, but even considering these other factors, happy, peaceful play clearly increased as the weeks went on, in part due to the new awareness the adults were bringing to the classroom.

Together we strived to refrain from distracting (redirecting) a child too soon or trying to make the children "happy" by swooping in with a ready solution. Parents made themselves ready to move in close, and respond or intervene as needed. Conflicts occurred less frequently in the final weeks, and there were no longer any full-blown struggles. A number of parents commented on how helpful they found the letter and article to be.

It's interesting to note that when a parent who was less familiar with the recommended approach would occasionally accompany a child to class in place of the parent who came regularly, they would likely use the more typical approach to conflicts – trying to solve the problem for the child; seeing one child as the aggressor, the other as the victim; or trying to “jolly” the child out of her frustration. I believe this contrast was not example of differences in parenting styles, but indicated that we really had begun to change the general classroom culture, with occasional lapses into old patterns. In short, allowing the conflicts to occur with less parental and teacher discomfort and less quick intervention, and verbalizing problems as they occurred, had the effect of noticeably increasing peaceful play within the classroom over time.

This “sports-casting” to the children differs from the traditional Waldorf approach, in which the teacher is urged to speak less and model more, quietly and “behind the scenes” create a healing and peaceful environment, indirectly address certain themes through story-telling and puppetry, and show the children more acceptable ways to interact. However, my own direct experience and observations with the RIE approach to toddler conflict, as well as the parents’ positive remarks and follow through, convince me of its worth and appropriateness within the classroom, in addition to the more traditional, and deeply valuable, Waldorf approaches.

Kim Payne, a psychologist and former Waldorf teacher who lectures worldwide on parenting and education is opening new areas of inquiry within Waldorf Schools by encouraging a more direct approach to conflicts among children of all ages. “As adults,” Payne said during a lecture entitled *When Push Comes to Love: How to Raise Civilized Children in an Uncivilized World*, “we need to get over our ‘harmony addiction’ and develop policies both at home and at school for dealing with conflict in a more straightforward way.”<sup>16</sup> He, too, urges us to embrace conflict – not to immediately separate children when they are arguing, but to help them work it out so that they can develop a sense of who they are in relation to others.

My interest in how to handle toddler conflict has prompted me to begin studying the topic of conflict resolution more generally, and to engage in a more in-depth exploration of my own feelings about conflict. Toward this end, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, by Marshall B. Rosenberg Ph.D., is a valuable book that could have remarkably healing effects on individuals, families and organizations taking up the practices it outlines. The language and communication skills described are meant to strengthen our ability to remain open, human, authentic and responsive even in challenging situations. He invites to compassionately work our way through conflicts by observing our feelings, realizing our needs and calmly making requests. His nonviolent communication process (NVC) has been used with much success in situations ranging from family and relationship problems, to community-wide conflicts, to political strife on a global scale.<sup>17</sup>

As Morrish wrote, “A few years from now, our children will be in charge of our country and our communities...They will be responsible for looking after the environment, preventing wars, and educating a new generation of children. How well our children do in the years to come will, to a great extent, be determined by how well we raise them now.”<sup>18</sup>

Like the children who have the potential to grow and learn through conflict, if we let them, we all can benefit from using the tools that lead to conflict resolution. With practice, we can become worthy examples to our own children, to the children in our classrooms and their parents, and to our communities—as we learn to make peace with conflict.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ehrensaft, Barbara (1997), *Spoiling Childhood: How Well-Meaning Parents Are Giving Children Too Much – But Not What They Need*, New York, NY: The Guilford Press, p. 238.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.187.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 163-164.

<sup>4</sup> Gerber, Magda (1998), *Your Self-Confident Baby: How to encourage your child's natural abilities – from the very start*, New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., pp. 3-4.

- <sup>5</sup> Baldwin, Sarah (2004), *Nurturing Children and Families: One Model of a Parent/Child Program in a Waldorf School*, Spring Valley, NY: Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America, p. 89.
- <sup>6</sup> Patterson, Barbara, and Bradley, Pamela (2000), *Beyond the Rainbow Bridge: Nurturing our children from birth to seven*, Michaelmas Press, Amesbury, MA, p. 119.
- <sup>7</sup> Morrish, Ronald G. (1999), *Secrets of Discipline for Parents and Teachers: 12 keys for raising responsible children*, Woodstream Publishing, Fonthill, Ontario, Canada, pp. 57-58.
- <sup>8</sup> Patterson, 119.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Gerber, pp.188-189.
- <sup>11</sup> Assisting Denise A. Da Ros and Beverly A. Kovach, "Assisting Toddlers and Caregivers During Conflict Resolutions: Interactions that Promote Socialization," *Childhood Education*, Fall, 1998, p. 29.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 30
- <sup>14</sup> Oppenheimer, p. 73.
- <sup>15</sup> Gerber, p. 190
- <sup>16</sup> Website article, "When Push Comes to Love: How to Raise Civilized Children in an Uncivilized World," Kim Payne website: [www.thechildtoday.org](http://www.thechildtoday.org). <sup>17</sup> Rosenberg, p. 8.
- <sup>18</sup> Morrish, p. 141.

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