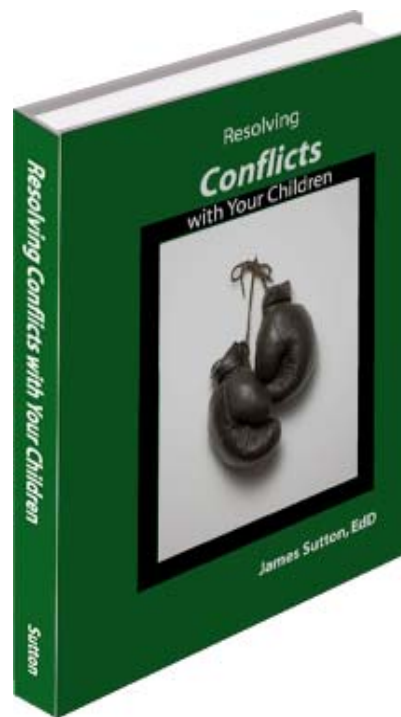


Resolving Conflicts with Your Children



-a resource for parents and teachers-

Dr. James Sutton

Resolving Conflicts with Your Children: a resource for parents and teachers

This complimentary e-book addresses the sort of damaging conflict that can occur between parent and child or between teacher and student. It offers a ten-step, problem-solving intervention that can be used with a child or adolescent. The author is nationally recognized educator, psychologist and best-selling author, Dr. James Sutton.

As long as there are parents and children or teachers and students, there will be conflict. It's a component of relationships from time to time.

Conflict isn't always a bad thing; sometimes it's necessary. Otherwise, all children would grow up so self-centered and egotistical they wouldn't be able even to stand themselves.

No, we don't want to eliminate conflict. What we want to eliminate is the damage mismanaged conflict can inflict.

Conflict and Survival

Conflict occurs when each person in the conflict wants to win. As a concept, the need to win began as a biological imperative. It was more than just a good idea to win. When early man crawled out of his cave, he could not afford to lose even once. Survival depended on it, and you'd better believe it was etched on every fiber in the gene pool.

But, even then, winning produced an interesting by-product—a victim. Victims back then, however, weren't much of a problem because they didn't last long. They were eaten quickly. The victim problem was absorbed in the process of survival. If you were still alive at the end of the day, you were the winner. Keeping score was not difficult.

This isn't true today, is it? Victims can hang around for decades, giving their hurt, pain, embarrassment and frustration years to boil and fester. The accumulation of negative experiences and bad memories handicaps these folks in life and steals their joy. The victim issue is, in my opinion, the absolute root of much misery, disease, divorce, and even death in our world today.

Unfortunately, our typical avenues for helping victimized individuals get past life-limiting issues have, on balance, been less than successful. This is nothing new; we've known it for years. What is new, at least to me, is the change in our perception of the problem. Can that really make a difference? Folks, it can make ALL the difference. Read on.

Epiphany

Have you ever had an epiphany, an instant when everything becomes crystal-clear? I'm talking about an instant when answers to years of questions fell squarely into your lap unannounced? This is exactly what happened to me on a trip to California this past summer. Someone I didn't even know showed me how to connect the dots on a picture that to me had always been incomplete. It was a picture of the potential to heal hurting young people at a level of almost 100%.

As the picture and how to share it with others became clear to me, I could hardly wait to get back home and dive head-first into the project. It will be the most meaningful thing I have written in 30 years. What you are reading now is but a small part of the larger work.

My summer epiphany might have been a miracle to me only, but it did cause me to look at all the well-intending mistakes I made in the past as an educator, psychologist and, yes, as a father. (I made a *bunch* of them.) What I learned caused me to stop looking out there for the problem, but rather to look *inside* for the solution.

A pretty radical approach, huh? Well, it works. Consider how this approach works with marvelous consistency in one of the most solid models of healing you'll ever find: the *Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous*. (You can Google that.) Consider the work of Hawaiian psychologist Dr. Ihaleakala Hew Len. He put into motion the healing of a whole ward of criminally insane patients, not by working on *them*, but by working on himself.

Was he successful? From what I have learned, all the patients except two were healed, and the ward eventually was closed.

I'll get into more detail about this in the new work, ***The Changing Behavior Book: a fresh approach to the difficult child***, but consider how this approach really isn't that farfetched at all. Whenever we change, and I'm talking about life-altering, cleansing change, others will change also. They **MUST** change; they *cannot* remain the same.

For now, let's get back to the issue of resolving conflict.

Demolition Derby

When I was a kid, Dad and my uncle Ray loved to go to the stock car races. Since I was the oldest grandchild by several years, I had the honor of tagging along.

These were dirt-track events, which meant that, if you sat close to the track, some of that dirt would end up on you! That was pretty cool for this nine-year-old.

My favorite event was the Demolition Derby. (They still have them today, usually as a stand-alone event at county fairs.) Contestants would pile into junker cars and make it their goal to be the last car still capable of moving.

It was a HOOT! Cars would go ramming into one another, each one trying to deliver a blow that would disable the other (the radiator was the bull's-eye). It was conflict on a grand scale.

Or was it? When the Demolition Derby was over, all the drivers would pile into the one car still running and head for the local watering hole for a few beers and a bunch of stories. It wasn't conflict; it was entertainment. And *everyone* knew it.

In real life, however, conflict can put human beings out of commission *permanently*.

Coercion and Conflict

As I mentioned earlier, a person's need to win can include the need to cajole, coerce or otherwise overpower *anyone* or *anything* in their way. In fact, the coercive component of conflict is so predictable in its course that Dr. Gerald Patterson of the University of Oregon has a name for it: *The Coercive Process*. (I've never met Dr. Patterson, but I did spend a day with Dr. Jeremy Shapiro, a psychologist with Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. Dr. Shapiro is very knowledgeable of Dr. Patterson's work.)

The Coercive Process, sometimes called *The Coercive Loop*, is operating whenever two individuals become so disagreeable with one another that the response of one adds fuel and yet more negativity to the response of the other. From there it escalates until the one initiating the conflict either capitulates or in some way shoves the other into compliance.

Here's an example of a coercive process; it involves a married couple:

Wife: *Tell me, why are you so mean and hateful all the time. I'd like to know.*

Husband: *Well, I reckon anyone married to you would turn out mean and hateful sooner or later.*

I don't see those folks having a very pleasant weekend together. Do you perceive a "hook," a coercive barb in each partner's statement? It provides plenty of fuel for the next response until the wife does one or the other of the following:

Capitulates: *I don't know why I'm even wasting my breath talking about it.* (she leaves the room)

Dominates: *If you can't do better than that, just LEAVE. Leave, right now, I tell you. Come back when you have a better attitude.*

The good news about this little scenario is that both of them are adults (well, sort of), fairly capable of taking care of themselves in the conflict.

(I knew of a couple who would get into massive conflicts on a regular basis. The husband developed a stress-related colon condition which, when in episode, required hospitalization and a *lot* of expense. It got to the point where he only had look like he was getting sick during an argument and the wife would capitulate. He controlled it all with his GUT!)

But what happens when the coercive process starts boiling between a frustrated adult and an irresponsible youngster? Exactly how does a kid manage to hold his own against the size, power, resources and demands of the adult?

He doesn't, not directly anyway. That would be way too dangerous and risky. But the youngster does get in his shots in other ways: passive-aggressive behavior, forgetfulness, "silent" oppositionality and defiance, and the big one: noncompliance. (I knew a pre-teen who would poop his pants whenever his stepmother would push a confrontation into painful conflict. Although that behavior sent her into orbit, it also brought the discussion to a rapid close!) Many of these behaviors were prime reasons for referral of a youngster to my office. They were *exactly* the reason why subsequent conflict happened and kept on happening. It became a vicious cycle.

Resolving Conflict

The secret to resolving negative conflict with a youngster is to remove the coercive elements and manage it like a problem-solving discussion. It's also important to understand that *resolving* the conflict is better than *winning* the conflict because there doesn't have to be a loser. We're going to cover the process of this confrontation step-by-step. (I'm not wild about using the term "confrontation," but it is the closest one that fits. At least we're not calling it "conflictation.")

The steps for resolving conflict require that the adult and the youngster are rational, focused, and comfortable enough to participate. It also means that neither is under the influence of drugs or alcohol, nor are they teetering on the fringes of control over too many of their own issues. Rational, focused and comfortable enough.

1. Approach the situation as if every problem was your fault. Although that might not be the case, coming at the confrontation from a position of 100% responsibility can change you in a way that is not only positive, but cleansing and effective beyond belief. At the very least, taking responsibility manages your anger and frustration. It positions you as a player in the discussion rather than an accuser and, perhaps for the first time, it will open the ears and the mind of the youngster. Remember Dr. Hew Len's success with the criminally insane patients? This is how he approached his work with them. Considering the severity of these patients, what else *could* he change other than himself? In comparison, any work we would do with reasonably intact children and adolescents ought to be a dream!

(If this approach bothers you a little bit, congratulations. You're normal; it bothered me, too. Just keep in mind that, as the youngster later offers you his take on the problems at hand and suggests solutions, he will become 100% responsible for acting on the solutions *he* has suggested.)

2. Remember, your children and students don't hate you. Kids can and will say some terrible and cutting things when they are upset, but they rarely mean them. In all my years of working with young people and their families, I've encountered less than a handful of youngsters who didn't genuinely care about their relationships with parents and teachers. Anger and frustration can cloud things a lot but, beneath it all, that caring is almost always there.

3. **Slow down—A LOT.** Speed is the enemy of reason and effective, empowered solutions. If you have to do anything quickly, the results often will be less than optimal. If this discussion, this positive confrontation, is to be effective, it can't be rushed. The path to authentic healing is a *slow* path.

4. **Be sensitive to the “where” of the confrontation.** Physical locations often arouse rough and troubling memories of what has happened in that place. It can be a mental and an emotional obstacle for both of you. It's important to move the confrontation to a more neutral location.

5. **Be physically and emotionally relaxed as you open the confrontation.** Body language is a powerful transmitter of what's coming. Keep it conversational and noncoercive. I've had success talking with youngsters as we took a short walk together. There's something about movement that makes the process work better. If you're seeing the child or adolescent at school, however, confidentiality might limit your mobility.

6. **Open the confrontation with an objective statement of fact.** Don't infer anything that can't be observed or documented. Describing the child's behavior should be like describing a photo or video. This is so critical because, if the confrontation includes too much inferred content (“You just don't care about doing *anything* to help out around this house”), you'll probably lose the youngster at that point. Besides, you don't really know what's going on inside her head anyway.

Although the facts are confrontational, they are, after all, still the facts.

Here's an opener coming from a father to a son:

Todd, two weeks ago you told me that every Wednesday morning before you left for school you'd bring the garbage bin around to the street so it can be emptied. I checked the bin when I came in this afternoon. It's still in the back, and it's full.

Todd might have some reasons why the garbage wasn't taken around, but he'd have a hard time arguing the location and the state of the bin at that moment. Just the facts (like Sergeant Joe Friday used to say in every episode of the old TV series, *Dragnet*).

You can even use this approach to confront an earlier outburst from the youngster. Remember to keep it descriptive and factual:

Marcy, when you left for school this morning you screamed, "I wish you weren't my mother," and slammed the door behind you.

At this point it's possible that one or both of these youngsters might attempt to offer an apology or even go and fix the problem right then. It's important, however, to redirect them back to the discussion so there won't be any interruption in the steps.

A teacher might state a positive confrontation like this. Notice how it remains descriptive and factual—as if the teacher is narrating a video of the youngster's behavior:

John, I have noticed that, when I give out an assignment, you frown and look upset. I've also noticed that those assignments don't get finished and turned in.

7. State your vulnerability. This step might seem a bit surprising, but the admission of vulnerability is considered a prized commodity in good, working relationships. (Besides, if we get upset at the child, become red in the face and start raising our voices, that's *also* an expression of vulnerability, but it's the sort of expression that can reinforce or pay off the behaviors we don't want from the child.) An appropriate expression of vulnerability from the adult is an indirect appeal to the youngster to fix the problem and help restore the relationship.

Vulnerability might be stated in the following ways, using the same scenarios as before. Notice how these statements are meant to pull the child into a position of responsibility without sounding too much like a lecture:

(Dad speaking to Todd) *It concerns me that we have to keep all that garbage in our back yard for another week, while we keep adding to it. It's unhealthy for our family, Todd, and that scares me some.*

(Mom to Marcy) *I was hurt by what you said, Marcy. There is no job or role I have that means more to me than being your mother.*

(Teacher to John) *It frustrates me, John, when I see a student of mine get further and further behind.*

8. Probe for the problem. In this phase of the confrontation, we ask the youngster for her take on the issue or problem that has been described. This can require patience, as a first answer might be, “I don’t know.” (A counselor friend of mine was fond of saying at this point, “Yes, but if you *did* know, what would the answer be?”)

If little or nothing comes from the youngster, suggest that you’ll give her some time to think it over while you’re still sitting with her. If the wait and the silence start to become uncomfortable, that’s good. There’s a good chance you’ll get an answer of some kind.

If the youngster still can’t come up with anything, suggest that one option would be to schedule another meeting, an “appointment” to have this discussion again at another time. It’s amazing how, when scheduling an appointment to go through this confrontation all over again (on the youngster’s time), insight suddenly arrives.

It is critical, of course, to probe for the problem without being overly accusatory in the process, or by asking questions that “lead” the youngster to the problem you want to address. (A youngster might agree that your “suggested” problem is the issue, but if she really doesn’t believe it, she won’t put much effort into the solution.)

Here’s some sample dialog using our three examples:

(Dad to Todd) *What’s the problem here, Todd, and how can we fix it? I REALLY want to know.*

(Mom to Marcy) *Help me understand. What was that about? Marcy, I don’t want for either of us to go through that again.*

(Teacher to John) *John, what do you see as the problem here?
How can we work this out so you don't fail this class?*

9. Extinguish the problem. This happens in two ways. First of all, problems are probed so they *can* be fixed. Start by working with the information the youngster gives you. Since it's his view, he will be more willing to put effort and energy into resolving it. You both might realize that it's not workable, but there's a decent chance that a plan can be developed. Make the solving of the problem or issue as win/win as you can, and comment on the effort the youngster puts into dealing with it (he wants you to notice).

By way of example, let's say that Todd tells Dad that he needs help remembering about trash day. Perhaps they come up with a "cue," a digital photo of the garbage bin. Dad hands his son the picture the evening before (a nonverbal reminder), and Todd puts the photo on top of his school books or in some other conspicuous place. (Haven't we all as adults needed a "reminder" once in awhile?)

Be aware that the youngster might come up with a problem that really isn't *the* problem. It might be a trial balloon, a test. This could be due to a certain amount of fear and apprehension, or it could be a way to see just how committed and authentic you are in helping to resolve the problem. That leads to a follow-up question, the other way we extinguish the problem. Here are a couple of examples:

Great; that's definitely something we can work on. Tell me, is there anything else? Anything at all?

Are we good? Are there any other issues or problems that you can think of?

“Extinguishing” questions can be quite therapeutic because the *real* problem often bubbles to the surface after the first one is shared and discussed. When the youngster says there are no other problems, he’s expected to commit to fixing the one he’s mentioned.

(I worked with a 14-year-old girl who had been placed in a group home because her mother had a multitude of issues in her life, including cancer. I visited with the girl and asked her if she had any problems she needed to work on. “No, I don’t,” was her terse response.

When our visit was over she asked me if she could go home. “Your mom’s not ready for you to come home just yet,” I explained. “She’s dealing with a lot of issues right now.”

“Well, I have issues, too!” the girl screamed at me. I reminded her that, just a few minutes earlier, she had told me she had no issues or problems. I then asked her which statement was true. Challenged to select either “A” or “B,” she took “C” when she said, “Why are you being so *mean* to me?”)

Work on any other issues or problems that surface, or set a time to do so. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to have a quick conference later to check on progress and implement appropriate changes.

10. **Thank the youngster.** When closing this confrontation, express your appreciation to the youngster for her efforts in helping you with the issues identified. A follow-up note, a written acknowledgment, would be a great idea.

Headings-only List

It might help to look at the ten steps written as a headings-only list:

1. Approach the situation as if every problem was your fault.
2. Remember, your children and students don't hate you.
3. Slow down—a lot.
4. Be sensitive to the “where” of the confrontation.
5. Be physically and emotionally relaxed as you open the confrontation.
6. Open the confrontation with an objective statement of fact.
7. State your vulnerability.
8. Probe for the problem.
9. Extinguish the problem.
10. Thank the youngster.

Two Other Types of Confrontation

In the new book project, *The Changing Behavior Book: a fresh approach to the difficult child*, I include two more confrontation approaches to resolving conflict. One, I call it the “Aha! Confrontation,” is great to use when a child or adolescent demonstrates multiple, almost identical issues of noncompliance, such as chronic bouts of missing or incomplete school work. I’ve been sharing it with teachers for years.

The goal here is to focus more on the solution than the confrontation. To do this, you make the problem tangible (so the child can actually see and touch it) as you spontaneously and gently interpret the defiance and pull the youngster in as a player in resolving the problem.

The other type of confrontation to be covered is called the “Good Faith Confrontation.” This approach is designed specifically for parents, not teachers. It takes a tremendous amount of vulnerability and requires parents to buy into their part of the problem and act on it vigorously and quickly. It’s this specific action that lays the foundation for success. Improvement with this intervention can be measured in minutes, not weeks. There is a downside, however: many folks aren’t ready for this deep an intervention, nor is it appropriate for every situation.

A Work-in-Progress

In the new book, *The Changing Behavior Book: a fresh approach to the difficult child*, I discuss why some behavior in young people is so resistant to change, and why offering incentives or rewards for improved behavior might not only be ineffective, but

counterproductive. The book concludes with many specific interventions that can be used to encourage and sustain improved behavior in young people in both the home and school environments.

Let me be clear about this new work. The core of it is unique to the whole practice of addressing the needs and the healing of the difficult child. It absolutely makes more sense to me than any other single thing I have learned professionally—ever. It involves my response to that summer epiphany I mentioned earlier, starting with the story of Dr. Hew Len’s incredible success with near impossible individuals and situations. That sort of change starts in a place where we should be able to work uninterrupted and without interference—within *ourselves*. When change starts there, it’s unstoppable.

My plans are first to introduce *The Changing Behavior Book: a fresh approach to the difficult child* as an e-book. It’s the quickest way to get the book out and where it needs to go, and it’s easy to send internationally by internet. If you would like to receive word when it is finished, simply email me (suttonjd@docspeak.com) and put “Changing Behavior” in the subject line. That’s all you need to do. (And yes, we’ll guard your email address.) When the book is finished, my office will send you an email with more information about the e-book and how to download it.

I wish you much more than success. I wish you a life-lifting epiphany.

—JDS

P.S. You can now read a description of *The Changing Behavior Book* and its 20 chapters. Go to: <http://www.docspeak.com/Download/Letchange.htm>

To contact Dr. Sutton for consultation or training, call 800-659-6628, or email him at suttonjd@docspeak.com. Visit his website at www.docspeak.com

Additional links and resources

The follow links are provided as a resource. They can all be assessed through click-through links on the homepage of www.docspeak.com:

The ODD Management Digest— This is a free monthly publication that is delivered by email. It offers insights and strategies to parents, teachers and counselors on working more effectively with difficult and defiant youngsters. www.trafficwave.net/lcp/docspeak/digest

The ODD Page— This is a resource site specializing in the topic of *Oppositional Defiant Disorder*. There are a number of excellent and free resources here, but start with “Frequently Asked Questions.” www.docspeak.com/ODD/index.htm

eBooks and Downloadable Guides— Check out the ebooks available for a nominal cost on this site. These materials are available for instant download, and there are no shipping charges. Materials can be purchased safely and securely using a credit card or echeck. www.docspeak.com/Ebooks/index

Traditional Books and Materials— Seven books by Dr. Sutton are available for online ordering. These are purchased online or by phone, then they are shipped by mail. www.docspeak.com/Books/INDEX.HTM

Training Programs by Dr. Sutton— Here is a listing of Dr. Sutton’s training programs for educators, parents, and child service professionals. Included are keynote programs, breakout sessions, and half and full-trainings on a number of topics. (These program make great fundraisers for associations.) www.docspeak.com/Programs/INDEX.HTM