Conflict as Social Interaction: Building Relationship Skills in Child Care Settings

Margaret Sims
Teresa Hutchins
Madeleine Taylor
Edith Cowan University, Australia

ABSTRACT: Learning the skills to build relationships is an important part of child development. Good relationship skills in childhood lay the foundation for healthy adult relationships. Young children's relationships are characterized by a high degree of conflict, as children learn the cognitive skills of taking another's perspective, thinking in terms of multiple attributes and anticipating the consequences of their actions. Children who learn to resolve conflicts successfully become more popular and interact with other children more frequently and for longer periods of time as they grow older, thus practicing interpersonal skills more frequently and consolidating their advantage. This project looks at the conflicts in which young children engage in group care settings. The aim is to understand the children's meanings of conflict by observing their behavior in context. Understanding the meanings of conflict for children can inform caregivers' strategies for guiding their behavior and for developing effective conflict resolution strategies in children.

Children's conflicts are a source of much stress to caregivers working in child care centers (Dinwiddie, 1994), as well as to the children themselves. In such situations, understanding children's conflict behavior is prerequisite to caregivers offering appropriate support to children. Caregivers also need to develop expertise in supporting children to resolve conflicts so that the conflicts become positive learning experiences for children. Ramsey (1991) suggests, however, that the surface cause of conflict may not be the real, underlying cause and that to understand what lies at the root of children's conflict requires an in-depth analysis. This study attempts such an analysis by using an interpretive approach, which requires that data be collected in natural settings (e.g., Selman, Schorin, Stone, & Phelps, 1983; Eisen-
berg & Garvey, 1981) as it is children's understandings of their behavior in the context in which it occurs that is crucial.

Research in natural settings is fraught with a number of problems (e.g., Sims, Hutchins, & Taylor, 1994) that make it a less popular approach among researchers. For example, in such research it is very difficult to link cause and effect as any number of intervening factors, often uncontrollable in natural settings, impact on the relationship between the parameters studied. Data collection can also be more challenging: videotaping children's behavior in an outdoor setting where the wind is blowing sand about is very difficult.

In this study, children's conflicts will be examined with the aim of uncovering their underlying causes and thus contributing to the understanding of dynamic, ongoing relationship building in early childhood. The basic assumption is that it is children's understandings of their own behavior that provide the key to developing shared meanings of conflict behavior. It is important that these understandings and those of the caregivers be congruent if caregivers are to support children effectively in their conflicts and to use the conflicts as positive learning experiences.

**Literature Review**

Social competence is an important part of children's development (Guralnick 1989, 1990; Odom, McConnell, & McEvoy, 1992). The development of social competence in early childhood impacts significantly on children's development in later life. Early peer relationship difficulties result in later problems such as school withdrawal, some forms of criminal behavior, and possibly mental health problems (Parker & Asher, 1987). Social competence is associated with development in other domains. Cognitive abilities such as information skills, memory and categorization skills, and the ability to recognize and display affect appear to be linked to social competence (Walden & Field, 1990), as are the emergence of language and general levels of motor development (Guralnick, 1992). Interpersonal relationships have also been linked to physical health and well-being (Wills, 1991).

Peer entry skills are an important aspect of social competence. Further interaction practice is not available to children who are unsuccessful at joining others at play (e.g., Putallaz & Wasserman, 1989). In addition, interactions between young children are characteristically short, so children are constantly having to join new groups (Ramsey, 1991). A number of strategies have been identified as useful in initiating peer group entry, including the ability to observe the