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Helping girls to stand tall

by Michael Grose

Helping girls manage conflict is complex. Unlike conflict between boys which is loud, boisterous, and over as quickly as it began, most conflict between girls lingers on, taking up unwanted mind space and harming their mental health. "She's so mean to me. I hate her," is the type of statement that many parents have heard their daughters utter.

Girls handle conflict in one of three ways: like a shark (aggressively), a turtle (passively) or an owl (assertively). Let's look at each style:

Shark (aggressive)

A shark is intent on winning and coming out on top when there's a problem. Shark behaviours include a raised voice, shouting, physical contact, threats, and name-calling. Sharks are effective at getting what they want but they can hurt people in the process.

Turtle (passive)

A turtle pulls its head in and hides in its shell when conflict arises. When treated unfairly girls retreat into themselves, experiencing frustration, anxiety and even sadness. In extreme cases turtles become targets for less pleasant girls, who know they won't retaliate.

Owl (assertive)

An owl deals with conflict without avoiding the issues. Owls express their rights and needs in positive ways and do their utmost to resolve problems rather than try to gain a personal win. They use assertive communication strategies rather than aggression or passive acceptance.

How to help

Parents can help their daughters develop the skills and behaviours needed to effectively resolve conflict and manage difficult feelings. Sibling and parent-child disagreements are fruitful grounds for girls to learn how to better manage themselves and others during disputes. Here are three owl-like conflict resolution strategies girls can use:

Teach I-statements

Learning to use these statements empowers girls to take responsibility for communicating how they feel. I-statements help your daughter express her feelings appropriately without being aggressive or intimidating.

The script for I-statements is:

When you..... I feel/felt.....because..... I would like

e.g. When you went to the movies with her, I felt angry because I was left out of the group. I would like you to let me know next time, instead of keeping it a secret and going behind my back.

Encourage strong body language

A girl's non-verbals including tone of voice, posture, eye contact and head positioning influences how much others take notice of her. A strong "This is what I want" verbal message delivered in a whiny, high-pitched voice or muttered with the head down indicates that a girl doesn't intend to be taken seriously. The same statement issued with strong body language and a firm voice helps her be taken seriously by others. Her message is only as strong as the body language that supports it. The non-verbal communication techniques outlined in [Spoonfed Generation](#), although written for parents are just as applicable for girls.

Speak with intent

Girls of all ages have a tendency to pepper their conversations with qualifiers such as, "I think...", "This may not be right, but...", "This might sound crazy...", "I know it is not my turn, but I was thinking that, like, ..." and so on. Qualifiers dilute the power of a girl's words, indicating uncertainty, lack of confidence and demonstrating a need for validation that undermines her authority.

If your daughter continually speaks with qualifiers, respectfully make her aware of this propensity. "Darling, you don't sound convincing. What exactly do you want?"

Most of us resolve conflict in ways that we learned at home in our families. Help your daughter develop effective patterns she can use to resolve conflict amicably, respectfully, and effectively so she can stand tall and feel confident in her own skin.

This is an edited extract from session 6 (Helping girls manage conflict) of the [Parenting Girls online course](#), a course that gives parents the tools and understanding to raise girls at any age. Each of the 12 sessions contains some written resources, a video with an interview or short presentation, and an accompanying summary.