

3 Steps that Transform Sibling Conflict into Sibling camaraderie

Help kids resolve minor disputes without playing judge or jury.

My two kids, now ages 4 and 9, seem to have lots of minor conflicts. They argue in the backseat of the car because one of them wants "quiet time" while the other wants to sing or tell me about their day. They argue about the seating arrangement for dinner (who gets the special wooden chair, who gets to sit next to which parent). They argue about one being in the other's physical space ("Stop touching me!") and over toys and markers ("I was using that first!")



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Over the years, I have handled these disputes using a combination of different strategies, including "letting them work it out", "teaching them effective communication skills (ha!)", "separating them", "giving each of them empathy," "mediating," "refereeing", "problem-solving" and "punishing."

None of these have been as effective, efficient, and satisfying to me (or to them!) as the method described below, a family-friendly adaptation of Dominic Barter's award winning Restorative Circles, which go by many different names around the world and are called Micro-Circles in our family.

What I love about the Micro-Circle process:

(a) it is fast and present-oriented – usually 6-10 minutes

(b) it is empowering for those involved – By engaging participants in hearing each other and creating their own solutions, you decrease both the sense of helplessness (we don't know how to solve this) – and powerlessness (we don't have choice in how things are gonna go) - which often result from having a third party (even a well-meaning one) be judge and jury to one's conflict.

(c) it seems to restore harmony and connection between participants – rather than leaving one or more of them feeling resentful or revengeful (as tends to happen when a third party, even a well-meaning one, imposes a solution)

d) it is another way to live what I now believe to be the **Most Important Thing To Know About Conflict**

THE 3 STEPS OF A MICRO-CIRCLE

1. CREATE A SPACE

Take a deep calming breath and interrupt the dispute as early as possible in its cycle, if you believe it is escalating. If you have talked about using Micro-Circles ahead of time (which I recommend), offer a Micro-Circle and invite participants to sit down where they can see each other.

Optional: I have also found it helpful to set the tone by reminding everyone why and how you do Micro-Circles (ex: "Just a reminder that we choose to do Micro-Circles in our family [classroom, etc] because they help us hear each other – and come up with ideas that work for everyone. We will try to hear the meaning underneath each other's words and body-language. Everyone will get a turn to communicate and be heard."

2. MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

For this phase, you have each participant *take a turn* sharing something they want the other(s) to know – followed by the Listener saying back their understanding of the message. I like to **start with the person I believe is least able to listen** (sometimes due to age, sometimes due to how upset they are).

Your tools for this phase are:

"What do you want Listener to know?"

"What do you think Communicator wants you to know?" (to discourage "parrot-phrasing" you can also do variations such as: "What is the meaning you hear underneath Communicator's words?"). Once people learn the idea, you can also use "What do you hear Communicator saying?" as shortcut.

"Is that it?" (or "Is that what you wanted heard?")

Then, same exact questions in reverse (Listener communicating, previous Communicator now Listening).

Refusal to Speak or Reflect Meaning

If the first invited Listener says they don't want to reflect the meaning, no problem. Ask them to speak and the other to reflect. After they feel heard, they are likely to be more able to listen.

If a person *says nothing* in response to "What do you want X to know?" I still ask the Listener to express their understanding of the *underlying message* – since non-verbal communication is just as powerful (if not more so) than verbal communication.

For instance, my son has learned that when his sister has her arms crossed silently, with a scowl on her face, he may reflect something like "She wants me to know she is too angry to talk?" – which I follow with "Is that what you wanted heard?" and so on from there.

3. ACTION PLAN

Once all parties have said they feel understood, you get THEM to come up with ideas for moving forward - while you sit back and enjoy.

Your tools for this phase are:

"Does anyone have any ideas for how to move forward with this?" (or "how to resolve this issue?"). I try not to use the phrase "solve this problem" because we want to emphasize that conflict is not a problem but an opportunity to work together, re-connect and understand each other better.

"Does that work for everyone?" (for me, the threshold here is "can everyone live with that idea" – rather than "is everyone overjoyed with that idea?")

To demonstrate how this may look in real life, below are two transcripts of actual micro-circles I facilitated with children. As you will see, the kids don't have to be siblings – but it helps if they (and their care-takers) know you and trust you.

EXAMPLE ONE: CAMPING TRIP (Aaron: 8; Rachel: 3 1/2; Zach: 6 1/2)

Rachel: "Mom! Aaron and Zach won't let me play with them!"

Me: "Aaron, can you come here please? Thank you. Rachel, **what do you want your brother to know?**"

Rachel: "I want to play with you guys!!"

Me: "Aaron, **what do you hear your sister saying?**"

Aaron, rolling his eyes, his voice sounding annoyed: "She wants to play with us. But..."

Me, interrupting gently: "Hold on, just a minute. **Rachel, is that it?** Is that what you want your brother to know?"

Rachel: "Yes!" [this completes one round – now we go to other child]

Me: "Ok, Aaron, **what do you want your sister to know?**"

Aaron: "I don't want her to play with us right now. I want some privacy. Not privacy, but like, Zach and I have not had a chance to play by ourselves all day. I just want some time with him."

Me: "Rachel, **what do you hear your brother saying?**"

Rachel, sounding quite sulky and unhappy: "He wants privacy. He wants to play with Zach alone."

Me: "Aaron, **is that it?**"

Aaron: "Yes." [this completes round 2 – now we go to first child]

Me: "Rachel, **is there anything else you want your brother to know?**"

Rachel: "No."

Me: "Aaron, **is there anything else you want Rachel to know?**"

Aaron: "No." [this completes Mutual Understanding. Now go to Action Plan.]

Me: "Ok, Thank you. Now, **does anyone have any ideas for how to solve this issue?**"

Rachel: "NO."

Aaron: "Well, she can play with us if she doesn't ask any questions. About the game or like what we're doing."

Me, feeling rather astounded, which is how I usually feel at this phase: "Rachel, your brother says its ok to play with him and Zach if you don't ask any questions about the game. **Does that work for you?**"

Rachel, sounding quite satisfied: "Yes."

Me: "Ok great. Thank you guys."

The 3 kids then proceed to play successfully together for about an hour. Aaron later reported that it worked out "ok" and that Rachel only asked one small question.

EXAMPLE TWO: LEGOS (Rachel: 3 1/2; Isaiah: 3 1/2)

We are at Isaiah's house and he has never participated in this process or observed it before.

Rachel: "Give me some! I want some!"

Isaiah: "No! Stop that!"

Isaiah's mom: "Hey guys. There is no need to fight. There are plenty of legos."

She gets up and gets a different container of legos and gives the new container to Rachel.

Rachel: "No! I want THOSE legos!"

Isaiah's mom: "Isaiah, can you share some of your legos with Rachel? Or take some of the ones from this box?"

Isaiah: "No! I want these. I was using them!"

Rachel is starting to screw up her face for some crying.

Me, coming over tentatively: "Do you mind if I try something different?"

Isaiah's mom: "No, go ahead."

Me: "Guys, guys. Hold on a second. I want to try something to help..."

[after getting their attention and a pause in the noise] Rachel, **what would you like Isaiah to know?**"

Rachel: **"I want to play with his legos! In that box!"**

Me: "Isaiah, **what do you hear Rachel saying?**"

Isaiah: "Stupid doo doo!"

Me: "Rachel, **is that it?** Is that what you want Isaiah to know?"

Rachel, mildly amused: "No. I want his legos."

Me: "Isaiah, **what do you hear Rachel saying now?**"

Isaiah: "She wants the legos. And all that blah blah blah stuff I don't want to hear."

Me: "Rachel, **is that it?**"

Rachel: "Yes." [this completes the first round; now we go to other child]

Me: "Ok, Isaiah, **what would you like Rachel to know?**"

Isaiah: "I don't want her to have the legos. I am USING them."

Me: "Rachel, **what do you hear Isaiah saying?**"

Rachel, sadly, "He doesn't want to share."

Me: "Isaiah, **is that it?** Is that what you want Rachel to know?"

Isaiah: "YEAH!" [this completes the second round; now we go to other child]

Me: "Rachel, **is there anything else you want Isaiah to know?**"

Rachel: "I am FRUSTRATED and ANGRY."

Me: "Isaiah, **what do you hear Rachel saying?**"

Isaiah: "She is frustrated and blah blah."

Me: "Rachel, is that it?"

Rachel: "Yes." [this completes third round; now we go to other child]

[After both children say they have nothing else to share, we go to Action Plan]

Me: "Thank you both. Now, **does anyone have any ideas about how to solve this issue?**"

Rachel: "NO."

Isaiah: "Yeah. Take that fish tank and spill it out and FLOOD this floor!"

Me: "Rachel, **does that work for you?** Will flooding the floor help solve this issue for you?"

Rachel, smiling a bit: "Nooo." [incidentally, the ideas need to work for EVERYONE, so anyone can jump in and say that a certain idea does not work, including the moms! Also, at times, other kids who have been listening will jump in with ideas. I simply take these and ask "does that work for everyone?"]

Me: "Ok, **does anyone have any other ideas to help solve this issue?**"

Isaiah, without speaking, takes the lego structure he was building, breaks it in half, gives one half

to Rachel, reaches into her box and takes a bunch of legos out of that box for himself, and sits down looking satisfied. Rachel looks very happy too.

Me, astounded as usual: "Ok. **Does this work for everyone?**"

Both kids: "Yes."

The kids then seem to experience a complete shift in how they were interacting with each other. They begin to play *together*, sharing legos back and forth. At one point, Rachel scoots over to Isaiah and pets his hair. They play happily like this for another 20 minutes.

What happens if it doesn't work?

It is important to me that micro-circles are a choice. Thus, if no one wants to reflect, I sometimes reflect one or the other for a few rounds or ask the kids if they want to do something different instead (ex: eat, separate). What's interesting is that many of our "failed" micro-circles (the ones that seem to fall apart before we get to Action Plan) wind up being successes – meaning the kids are actually "done" with the conflict and ready to do something positive – together or separately.

The important thing for me is to just keep offering it (and participating in it myself, in our case) week after week. Over time, it has become a part of how we do conflict in our family – along with yelling, threatening, sarcasm and "come here you crabby old thing and give me a big hug!". Hey – we're only human after all.