

Cooling Conflicts

by Jim Still-Pepper

Conflict occurs naturally, like weeds in a yard. It is not necessarily a sign that your youth program is flawed. However, poor conflict management can be destructive for your youth group. You can learn to handle conflicts. Here's how...

Cooling Youth-to -Youth Conflicts

Where two or more teens are gathered, don't be surprised if conflict shows up too. Teenagers have many wonderful attributes, but from time to time they also have great ability to be petty; anything in their world can be a "life-or-death" issue, and their hormones play havoc with them. It's no wonder a key skill in youth work is conflict management.

For little kids, adults can step in and resolve a fight by saying, "Shake hands and be friends." But working with teens requires more diverse, realistic conflict-resolution skills.

What is your role in youth-to-youth conflicts? Sometimes, you may get caught in the middle between two teens warring against each other. The middle is a bad place to be, because you are likely to be hit from both sides. The best position to be in is that of coach. A good conflict coach handles warring parties with these wise steps:

- Give them time to solve it on their own. Time enough may be 10 minutes or two weeks. Part of your decision as to how long to wait is determined by the players' actions. Ask yourself these four questions:

Is the conflict getting worse?

Is there danger of physical aggression?

Is the conflict starting to affect more people?

Has it gone on too long?

- Intervene immediately if the answer is yes to any of those questions. If not, wait a while; see if they can work it out. Encourage them to do so.
- Help them gain perspective: How important is this? Does the argument really matter? What would Jesus do?
- Avoid solving the problem for them. Rather, lead them in ways of working things out.
- Don't take sides initially—at least you and one of the parties will lose. Taking sides does not give them a chance to build conflict resolution skills.
- Teach the youth basic skills of how to deal with differences. (See "The ABC's of Conflict Management.")
- If they create a solution that doesn't work, then step in and teach them more skills. Don't expect them to know all they need to resolve the dispute.
- Reassure them of your love. Remember, kids are usually uncomfortable in conflict. They need to know someone is there for them.

DANGEROUS CONFLICT

Sometimes conflict can turn ugly—even deadly. If you sense the possibility of danger, follow these steps immediately!

- 1. Separate the youth in conflict.**
- 2. Make sure both youth have a loving adult with them.**
- 3. Get help from parents and professionals. The youth in conflict should have constant contact with responsible adults for at least 72 hours after the crisis has passed.**

4. **Do not reject them.**
5. **Go through the ABC's of Conflict Management only after they have had a chance to calm down.**

Cooling Youth to Adult Conflict

At some point you may find yourself the target of conflict. When we experience trouble with a youth or a group of youth, we need to remember that we may be their only living example of Christ! Here are some things to do, when you are in conflict with a youth.

- Understand what the conflict is really about. Youth have many motives for being in conflict with adults; maybe they want to gain attention, or to feel special, or seize control. The list can go on and on.
- Monitor your feelings closely. Your feelings are not always patience, understanding, or long-suffering. It's important to know how you are feeling, but it is more important to know how to handle yourself as Christ's ambassador.
- Keep your perspective. Even in the worst battle, what is really at stake? Practice good conflict management skills. Be willing to be the first to forgive and move on.
- Get outside help when you feel stuck or overwhelmed.

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The ABCs of Conflict Management

- A—Assess the problem. Define it on paper in one or two sentences.**
- B—Build options. Brainstorm ways of solving the problem.**
- C—Choose a solution together. This can be done by both parties agreeing on one option, or if they cannot agree on one together, then choose it by random assignment.**
- D—Do it together. Both parties should agree to work on solutions, not anger or getting even. You can help them create a Covenant of Change.**
- E—Evaluate the results. After a period of time, both parties should come together and talk about how the option is going.**
- F—Fine tune it. If the option is not right, what changes need to be made?**
- G—Go through it again. If the parties in conflict cannot get the original option to work, they pick another option and start over.**
- H—Have a race to see who can forgive first. Remember that God always forgives us when we ask, and we are to forgive as Christ forgave us. 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.**
- In order for Conflict Management to work well, the skills need to be practiced constantly and all parties must respect each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Though there are other steps, let's end with the most important one:**
- L—Let Love Loose. Use 1 Corinthians 13 as a guide.**

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