

Helping Youth Manage and Avoid Conflict

Conflict is a natural and expected element of human connection and is inevitable in most relationships. As such, understanding how to navigate conflict is a key part of building and maintaining healthy relationships. Especially in childhood and adolescence, youth are bound to experience a misunderstanding with their friend or peer at some point. For this reason, it is critical to equip children and youth with conflict resolution skills to help them work through conflict when it happens and to prevent from escalating to youth violence. Parents and caregivers have a big role to play in teaching kids the importance of conflict resolution and modeling healthy relationships. This tipsheet provides an overview of research related to youth conflict and violence, and offers strategies parents and caregivers can use to help encourage positive conflict resolution

What research says about youth violence

[Youth violence](#) is the “intentional use of physical force or power to threaten or harm others by young people,” typically ages 10 to 24. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), youth violence “can include things like fighting, bullying, threats with weapons, and gang-related violence.” Youth may experience violence in different ways—as a victim, a perpetrator, or a witness.

Youth violence is an important risk factor that can lead to [long-term health impacts on youth as well as the people around them](#). Children who are exposed to violence are more likely to experience [negative academic and mental health outcomes](#) such as bad grades, chronic absenteeism, dropping out, depression, or suicide.

Youth who experience violence are also likely to [experience further violence as a result](#), either as a perpetrator or victim. These youth are also at a [higher risk](#) to have worse grades, use drugs, or engage in risky sexual behavior. Youth violence can also result in [negative outcomes affecting youth’s communities](#), including increased health care costs, lowered property value, and reduced access to community-based services.

[LGBTQ+ youth](#) are more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience multiple forms of youth violence, and [Black students](#) are more likely than their White peers to experience the [most physically harmful forms of violence](#), such as injuries, homicide, and aggravated assault.

Understanding why youth conflict happens

It is important to understand why youth conflict happens, what its warning signs are, and any reasons that either encourage or discourage youth from fighting.

As a parent or caregiver, you may be curious about potential warning signs so you can identify and address them. In children and teens, many negative outcomes are [also risk factors for violence](#), including drug use, negative academic performance or attendance, and previous exposure to violence as a victim, perpetrator, or witness. Remember that youth violence is not caused by one factor, and it usually involves a combination of factors affecting an individual, their community, and larger social norms and views.

It is also important to understand what [protective factors](#) are. As the name suggests, protective factors are likely to protect individuals from negative outcomes. In this case, these qualities make youth less likely to experience violence. Factors that lower children’s risk of experiencing violence include high academic success and drive, close and trusting relationships with families and friends at school, and strong social skills.

One [study](#) that sought to understand why youth get in fights described some common themes for why youth find themselves involved in violence; similarly, the study also investigated why youth who avoid conflict are able to do so. This study found that youth engage in conflict for many reasons: as a response to provoking or threatening behavior, because their family members and media have normalized or condoned violence, or because they have experienced [community violence](#) (violence between two unrelated people). The table below summarizes the study’s findings.

Why youth fight	Why youth do not fight
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To protect themselves or others • In response to racism or discrimination • To get respect from peers • When provoked by peers • Family members condoning or providing inconsistent messaging about using violence in self-defense • Normalized or glorified violence in media and video games • Exposure to community violence • Viewing authority figures as ineffective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanting to avoid negative consequences • Fear that violence will lead to negative future consequences • Family members model ignoring gossip and insults, or walking away from instigators • Involvement in extracurricular or after-school activities and clubs • Positive relationships with teachers

Tips for you and your child

The following table lists strategies you may find helpful when talking to your child about conflicts they might have with friends or peers at school, along with tips for children and youth when navigating conflict themselves.

Tips for parents and guardians to help youth navigate conflict	Tips for children navigating conflict
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use effective parental monitoring practices to help children make healthy decisions and avoid risky behaviors. • Encourage open communication with children. This includes listening, acknowledging, empathizing, and supportively responding to children’s perspectives and experiences. • Help build your child’s confidence in using nonviolent conflict resolution techniques. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to understand. Although you may be hurt, try to listen thoughtfully to the person you are in conflict with. Try to understand their point of view and why they may feel or see things differently than you do. • Ask questions when you don’t understand. If you feel confused, ask clarifying questions to understand someone’s perspective. • Leave your assumptions at the door. It is easy to assume what may or may not be happening in someone else’s life, but remember that we never know the full picture, so try not to assume things.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Model healthy conflict resolution with your child and other people in your life.• Maintain a consistent stance regarding violence and stress nonviolent conflict resolution as an alternative.• Help children recognize their emotions and what they are feeling by teaching mindfulness and emotional regulation.• Encourage children to develop trusting relationships with their teachers or other adults at school.• Help children understand that not all conflict is bad, and to learn the difference between targeted aggression or bullying and common misunderstandings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicate without blaming. Use “I statements” to share how you feel, without placing that feeling on the other person.• Be aware of your own defensiveness. Conflict can be uncomfortable, and you may feel like you want to defend your actions. However, it is important to acknowledge and understand where the other person is coming from to try to reach common ground.• Know that conflict can be good. It is a chance to talk about your feelings and make your relationship more honest and open.• Stay calm. Don’t resort to physical violence or name-calling.• Avoid bringing other friends into the situation. Tell a trusted adult or person at school if you feel you need extra support and help working through the problem.
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