

Research Guide (Grades PreK–6)

College and Career Competency: *Conflict Management*

Definition:

Conflict is a term used to describe a struggle or contest between people with opposing needs, ideas, beliefs, or goals. While manifestations of conflict can range from minor disagreements to physical violence, conflict is a natural part of human interaction. Along with competing for limited resources, conflict can occur because of individual or group differences in rank, objectives, views, and traditions (Ayas et al., 2010). Conflict management skills can lessen those tensions or resolve problems that arise among individuals or groups who are at variance with one another. In short, conflict management can be defined as knowing how you usually respond to conflict, the reasons behind specific conflicts, and taking steps to resolve conflicts (Noonan et al., 2017).

Essential Components for Students:

1. Understand your natural response to conflict.
2. Understand the context of the conflict, including the perspectives of all involved.
3. Apply a conflict management approach that is appropriate to the situation.

Competency Sequence for Students:

These targets describe how students demonstrate competency knowledge (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2018). As outlined in the Assessments section, these targets can be used to determine students' growth over time through a performance-based observation process.

	Conflict Management
Beginning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands that conflict is normal and natural and that we are all different in many ways. • Describes and demonstrates simple conflict management techniques (asks for help, takes turns, finds a different toy to play with). • Identifies and labels their own basic feelings and emotions.
Emerging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies natural reasons for conflict and understands that conflict is normal. • Demonstrates the ability to listen to others' ideas and realizes other people may view things differently. • Identifies the problem in a conflict situation and states feelings and behaviors related to the problem. • Uses words and other positive strategies to resolve social conflicts and nurture relationships.
Proficient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates understanding of how one typically responds to various conflicts. • Demonstrates understanding of what anger indicates and possible triggers of anger in self and others. • Restates anger statements as "I" statements, expressing feelings clearly. • Identifies a variety of conflict management strategies to apply to various situations. • Displays active listening skills to respectfully listen to and reflect other people's feelings and positions.

Research:

- The way that students approach conflict can be constructive or destructive. An example of a constructive conflict approach is cooperation with the opposing party, and an example of a destructive approach is physical aggression. Research suggests that rising violence rates in schools can be attributed to conflict that was not resolved in a constructive way in a timely fashion (Ayas et al., 2010).
- Intervening as early as preschool to address conflict, aggression, and bullying in young children is important because these behaviors can escalate into more significant aggression if left unaddressed, leading to long-term negative social skills and peer interactions as the children age (Leff et al., 2001; Levine & Tamburrino, 2014).
 - By providing students with diverse texts and lessons, students will learn to not only tolerate but also appreciate and even celebrate the uniqueness in other people (Thornberg, 2010, as cited in Levine & Tamburrino, 2014).
 - Students at high risk for aggression who participate in early aggression prevention/intervention programs can better avoid future increased aggression (Leff et al., 2001).
- Burdelski (2020) analyzed teachers' use of prompting and reported speech while mediating conflicts among young children. Teaching and encouraging students to use formulaic expressions—not just speaking them but also acting them out—helps students understand that a conflict is occurring and that there are social norms used for managing relationships. Students can learn to attune themselves to such speech and actions in order to interpret others' utterances and nonverbal communication. Burdelski cautions against caregivers' intervening into conflict too early. Instead, caregivers can teach children to use reported speech to repeat and therefore interpret what another has said.
- Peer mediation programs that include conflict management training and strategies can be successfully introduced in elementary schools (Bickmore, 2002; Cunningham et al. 1998; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Johnson et al., 1994).
 - In a study by Johnson and colleagues (1994), students in grades 1–6 who received 30 minutes of conflict resolution training a day over six weeks were able to learn negotiation and mediation procedures/skills and apply them in real conflicts. Johnson and Johnson (1996) conducted seven studies on the effectiveness of the Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers program with grades 1–9. They concluded that:
 - conflict resolution can be taught,
 - teaching conflict management has a positive impact on academic achievement when integrated into an English literature class, and
 - taking a whole-school approach to the training, compared to only training a small number of students, was more effective.
 - The Center for Conflict Resolution trained recent high school graduates to provide three days of peer mediation and conflict management instruction to groups of 25–30 students in grades 3–5 at 28 urban elementary schools (about 700 students in total). Researchers gathered quantitative and qualitative data in the first 12 months after the training program. One finding was that the conflict management program had a significant positive impact on student understanding of conflict resolution and problem solving as well as peer relationships and self-assessment of social skills (Bickmore, 2002).
- Effective conflict management training may require consideration of contributing demographic variables and individual child characteristics. For example, one study found that gender played a

role in how 430 secondary school students dealt with four different types of conflict: being made fun of, cursing, taking someone else's belongings without consent, and physical violence. Girls mostly used cooperative and avoidance strategies, while boys leaned towards cooperative and destructive strategies. The paper suggests that the boys' upbringing may be responsible for their aggressive conflict management style, and the authors call for training students' families to take part in mediation procedures (Ayas et al., 2010).

- Bullying affects large swaths of the student population and encompasses a range of actions, including “not just physical aggression, but also verbal aggression, including verbal harassment, spreading rumors, or social rejection and isolation” (Hamburger et al., 2011). A unique and more pervasive form of bullying is cyberbullying (Betts & Houston, 2012). Cyberbullying is defined as “an individual or a group willfully using information and communication involving electronic technologies to facilitate deliberate and repeated harassment or threat to another individual or group by sending or posting cruel text and/or graphics using technological means” and is a “systematic abuse of power and control over another individual” (Mason, 2008).
- Bullying negatively affects education and health (Armitage, 2021). Frequently bullied students are nearly twice as likely than infrequently bullied students to skip school and are more likely to want to end their education after high school. In 15 countries, test scores were 2.7% lower in students bullied monthly and 7.5% lower in students bullied weekly. Childhood victimization is associated with a risk of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and self-harm. Victims are not the only ones who experience these consequences. Bullies, including those who are themselves victims, experience suicidal ideation and behavior.
- Stressors at school could worsen problems for students whose executive functioning have not yet matured (Cumming et al., 2020). Alternatively, a classroom with emotional support helps the development of executive functioning. Cumming et al. (2020) write that the biggest factor in classroom relationships is inhibitory control, the ability to control one's own behavior and emotional responses. Students in conflict must manage their emotions in order to find resolution.
- In a study of a peer-mediated conflict management programs for elementary students, (Cunningham et al., 1998), fifth-grade students were trained to mediate conflicts during recess. The study involved three schools with students aged 4–10 (total school population 1,215) with a diverse socioeconomic family makeup. The student mediators received about 15 hours of mediation training conducted by teachers and school social workers. The students then patrolled quadrants of the playground in teams of two. Researchers found that the student mediators successfully resolved about 90% of conflicts and that physically aggressive behavior on the playground dropped significantly.

Assessments:

- The Conflict Management Formative Questionnaire (grades 7–12; Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2018) is a 21-item instrument that measures a student's proficiency in the three essential components of conflict management: understanding one's natural response to conflict, understanding the context and perspectives involved in the conflict, and applying an appropriate approach based on the specific conflict. The Conflict Management Formative Questionnaire results can be used by both teachers and students to assess relative strengths and areas for improvement. Students are asked to rate themselves on each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Not Very Like Me*, and 5 = *Very Like Me*); results are displayed on a 100-point scale. The results are automatically graphed for students once they complete the questionnaire, enabling them to immediately reflect on their results. Results are also available

to the teacher for individual students and in aggregate. The following example items represent each of the three essential components:

- I have thought about how I normally respond to conflicts. (Understand natural response)
- In an argument, I try to understand the other person's point of view. (Understand context and perspectives)
- When I'm involved in a disagreement, I stop and think about what I should say or do. (Apply approach)

Results are immediately available for reflection. Teachers can access the questionnaire by setting up an account at <https://www.cccstudent.org/> and following the instructions to create an assessment and administer it to students. Students (and teachers) can use individual questionnaire results to identify conflict management skills or behaviors that students can focus on cultivating or strengthening.

- The Conflict Management Knowledge Test (grades 7–12; Enlow et al., 2020) is a curriculum-based measure that assesses students' knowledge of conflict management constructs and judgement of the most effective course of action when applying these constructs. The test includes multiple-choice, true/false, situational judgement, and short-answer items. The following are a few example items:
 - Choose the best description of conflict management.
 - a. Resolving the conflict by talking to the other person and coming to a compromise through either negotiation or mediation.
 - b. Resolving the conflict by agreeing to what the other person wants.
 - c. Knowing how you usually respond to conflict, the reasons behind specific conflicts, and taking steps to resolve conflicts.
 - d. Knowing how the other people usually respond to conflict so that you can avoid it
 - True or false: Conflicts happen infrequently and can typically be avoided.
 - Imagine for a project that you want to design a model but that your partner wants to give a presentation. How would you approach the conflict using different styles?

The knowledge test is directly aligned with *Teaching Conflict Management in Middle and High School Classrooms* (Noonan et al., 2017; see the first item under Instructional Practices, below). The test can be used as a pre/post measure prior to and after teaching the conflict management lessons. Accommodations should be provided when appropriate and may include reading the items aloud, explaining the items, and having a scribe fill in the response option. Once students have completed the knowledge test on <https://www.cccstudent.org/>, teachers can view graphed results for individual students and aggregate results for all their students. Teachers can also download a raw data file.

- The Conflict Management Styles Assessment (Adkins, 2006) is self-report measure designed to help students identify preferred conflict management styles. Using a 4-point Likert-type scale from *Rarely* to *Always*, students rate items associated with each of five styles of conflict management: collaborating, avoiding, competing, accommodating, and compromising. Collaborating works toward solving problems in ways that optimize solutions for all involved; competing is an authoritarian, quick approach where force is a factor; avoiding is nonconfrontational where interested parties stay away from conflict; accommodating preserves relationships but may breed resentment; and compromising is a middle ground approach that takes into account the conflict solver's own goals and preserves relationships (Adkins, 2006). Students are reminded to answer the questions honestly, as there are no right or wrong

answers; summarized results outline pros and cons for each conflict management style. Here are example statements demonstrating each style:

- I explore issues with others so as to find solutions that meet everyone’s needs. (collaborating)
 - I would argue my case and insist on the merits of my point of view. (competing)
 - When I find myself in an argument, I usually say very little and try to leave as soon as possible. (avoiding)
 - I may not get what I want, but it’s a small price to pay for keeping the peace. (accommodating)
 - I try to negotiate and adopt a give-and-take approach to problem situations. (compromising)
- The Conflict Management Performance-Based Observation (Noonan & Gaumer Erickson, 2020) is design to be embedded within authentic situations such as academic courses and extracurricular activities. The Conflict Management Performance-Based Observation can be used at purposeful intervals to monitor each student’s development. Based on observations across time or in specific situations, the educator rates each student’s conflict management behaviors on the following scale:
 - *Beginning*: Not yet able to demonstrate without scaffolding;
 - *Emerging*: Minimal or superficial demonstration, prompting likely required;
 - *Proficient*: Sufficient demonstration, including self-appraisal and detailed, personalized application;
 - *Advanced*: Independent and consistent demonstration, teaches/prompts others; or
 - *Not Observed*: Documented if there has not been the opportunity to observe the behavior performed by an individual student.

Example observed behaviors include the following:

- Anticipates outcomes when different conflict management styles are applied to various situations.
- Demonstrates understanding the context of conflicts, including the perspectives of all involved.
- Applies appropriate conflict management approaches to situations based on desired outcomes.

Summary reports are automatically generated on <https://www.cccstudent.org/>.

- The Conflict Management Performance-Based Reflection (Enlow et al., 2021), directly aligned with the Performance-Based Observation, promotes students’ reflection on their demonstration of conflict management behaviors within authentic situations. This three-item rubric guides students to determine their application of the conflict management components: understanding your usual response to conflict, determining the reasons behind specific conflicts, and taking steps to resolve conflicts. Triangulating students’ ratings with the Performance-Based Observation results in a more comprehensive analysis of performance. The Conflict Management Performance-Based Reflection can be used at purposeful intervals to monitor the development of each student. Students reflect on the following conflict management behaviors:
 - know your usual response to conflict,
 - know the reasons for the conflict, and
 - take steps to manage the conflict.

The Conflict Management Assessment Suite: Technical Report (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2022) includes further background on assertiveness constructs, administration procedures, validity and reliability evidence, recommended uses of the results, and descriptions of the assessment items.

Instructional Practices:

- [*Teaching Conflict Management in Middle and High School Classrooms*](#) (Noonan et al., 2017) outlines more than 25 instructional activities across eight lessons:

- Lesson 1: Defining Conflict Management
- Lesson 2: Understanding Your Ability to Manage Conflicts
- Lesson 3: Understanding Your Natural Response to Conflict
- Lesson 4: Understanding Anger
- Lesson 5: Understanding Context
- Lesson 6: Managing the Conflict
- Lesson 7: Helping Others Manage Conflict
- Lesson 8: Conflict Management—Putting It All Together

The lessons include explicit instruction and application elements that teachers can modify based on students' experiences and needs. The lessons, accompanied by a PDF student workbook with worksheets that can be reproduced to facilitate learning, are available for purchase at <https://www.cccframework.org/competency-lessons-and-student-workbooks/>.

- Group projects can help students see that conflict need not mean violence and aggression. Instead, cooperative learning can be a creative and collaborative process with four phases: discovering, defining, developing, and delivering (Pasetti, 2021). Discovering and developing are phases during which collaborative partners generate ideas without concern for how they fit, while defining and delivery necessitate that the partners come to a consensus about how their ideas will fit together and be deliverable.
- For collaborative learning to be successful, teachers must guide students “at the meta level (e.g., giving feedback on students’ strategies or helping students plan their task progress) as well as on the relational space in general (e.g., giving feedback on students’ collaboration process or helping students resolve conflicts)” (van Leeuwen & Janssen, 2019, p. 84). Teachers who are too present or too absent are negatively associated with effective student collaboration. While it is imperative that teachers ensure students are on task, it is just as important that teachers not take complete control of the collaboration.
- Levine and Tamburrino (2014) found that young children can learn about handling conflict; bullying behaviors were less prevalent in classrooms where children were taught conflict management skills than in classes where students did not receive instruction. Some ways to incorporate conflict management instruction for students in pre-K and elementary include:
 - Lessons on conflict resolution can be integrated into circle time or read-alouds through reflective stories told by the educator. The stories give students a chance to think through and discuss different outcomes for the conflict.
 - Teachers could also take that opportunity to teach students how to discuss issues with each other. By giving students an object, such as a plastic ring (a “Peace Circle”), to hold onto, the students will have to face each other and take turns talking. By leaving the Peace Circles in easily accessible places around the classroom, the teacher could encourage the students to use it whenever they have conflict outside of circle time.
 - Teachers could offer daily check-ins to give children the chance (individually) to share feelings and events happening in their lives. These check-ins bolster confidence and “increase school/class empathy and attachment” (Levine & Tamburrino, 2014).
 - Peace journals allow students to express their feelings in words or pictures. Using the peace journals as a starting point can help open up communication between teachers and students.

- Feeling words posted around the classroom help students identify their feelings and express themselves more clearly. Students will be able to access these words readily and better talk through conflicts.
- Teaching Students to Be Peacemakers (TSP) is a program that has been integrated into elementary school classrooms (Johnson & Johnson, 2004; Johnson et al., 1994). Students learn conflict resolution in four stages: (1) mediation techniques, (2) compromise through a six-step negotiation process, (3) mediation of conflicts between their peers, and (4) practice being mediators (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Students from kindergarten through 12th grade can “be taught how to engage in problem-solving negotiations and how to mediate their schoolmates’ conflicts” (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).
- How to Identify Bullying is a resource from the National Education Association (n.d.) that provides [links, resources, and book/article recommendations](#). The activities are geared toward students in grades K–12, and the lesson plans are aimed at students in grades 2–12. Examples of the lessons/activities include:
 - [Introduction to the Dynamics of Bullying](#), a lesson for students in grades 2–6, though it can be modified for a younger audience (PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center, 2018).
 - [A Bad Case of Bullying](#), a lesson that helps students reflect on a narrative story about bullying (Cranston, n.d.). The lesson is intended for students in grades 3–5, and it can be completed in three 40-minute blocks.

This guide can be cited as: Gaumer Erickson, A. S., Noonan, P. M., & Lantz, T. (2023). *Research guide (Grades preK–6): College and career competency: Conflict management*. College & Career Competency Framework. <https://www.cccframework.org/>

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