

Research Guide (Grades 7–12)

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 sharing or competing for limited resources, conflict can occur because of individual or group differences in rank, objectives, views, or traditions (Ayas et al., 2010). Conflict management is the art of lessening tensions or resolving problems that arise among individuals or groups at variance with one another (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:

- Experts say that constructive conflict among students should occur frequently, that it is psychologically healthy, and that it can have many positive effects. These effects include bringing attention to issues, encouraging self-reflection, making relationships stronger, and improving students' abilities to work through hardships under stress (Johnson & Johnson, 2004). As a study by Ubinger et al. (2013) notes, adolescents who engage in conflict resolution report a greater satisfaction with life and exhibit fewer symptoms of psychological distress than adolescents who avoid conflict.
- 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). Students who learn and use constructive, solution-oriented approaches to conflict may guard themselves against loneliness and symptoms of depression; conversely, students who avoid conflict may worsen their loneliness and symptoms of depression (Wang et al., 2020).
- Two leading experts in constructive conflict resolution programs, David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, insist that students must receive conflict resolution training for an extended period of time before they are able to effectively resolve interpersonal conflicts. The benefits of this type of model include increased academic achievement, improved retention of subject matter, and healthier relationships with others. Studies also show that training is most successful when integrated with school subjects that inherently deal with conflict, such as literature, history, and science (Johnson & Johnson, 2004), and that this integration contributes to students' academic success (Stevahn et al., 1997).
 - A study conducted with 40 ninth-grade students showed that after incorporating conflict resolution training in an English literature class through the study of a novel, students were more likely to compromise with others and negotiate solutions when dealing with conflicts. They also understood the information presented in the book in a more insightful way than the students in the control group (Stevahn et al., 1997).
 - A meta-analysis of 16 studies measuring the impact of a conflict resolution skills training program integrated in English literature and history classes showed that students who participated in the program did better than students in the control group on examinations testing knowledge of the course materials (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).
- 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 study 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).
- Granting students larger roles in conflict resolution programs can be beneficial to the success of the programs. This gives students the opportunity to help themselves and their peers. Participating as trained peer mediators in school-run conflict resolution programs has enabled students to resolve conflicts in their own lives (Bickmore, 1993) by controlling their emotional reactions and recognizing how others might feel (Gouveia et al., 2019), leading to their

development of important life skills, including **communication**, leadership, negotiation, and decision making (Close & Lechman, 1997).

- Those involved in a conflict are not the only people who benefit from conflict management. Mediators themselves gain skills in active listening, questioning to discover causes and motivations, interpreting nonverbal behavior, understanding multiple and differing perspectives, practicing **empathy**, and remaining impartial (Malizia & Jameson, 2018).
- Studies show that destructive conflict at home or within the family unit can damage the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of adolescents and lead to numerous behavioral problems, including an inability to negotiate disagreements calmly with their peers (Bradford et al., 2003; Cummings et al., 2015). Adolescent behavior can also be adversely affected by a lack of emotional support from parents or other adult caregivers. Programs that teach parents and other family members how to effectively communicate with children and provide support for academic success and positive social behaviors are effective in guiding children towards positive decision making in school and in their interactions with their peers (Molnar et al., 2005).
- Adolescents use different conflict resolution strategies in different relationships (Dost-Gözkan, 2019). For instance, with mothers and best friends, the most common strategy is problem solving; with fathers, compliance (i.e., accommodating). However, despite the different strategies used, it is problem solving (i.e., compromising and collaborating) that is most positively associated with life satisfaction. Therefore, relationships in which problem solving is used can serve as a model for training in conflict management.
- Unlike other types of conflict between peers, bullying is the unprovoked and persistent psychological or physical abuse of an individual by another person (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Myklestad and Straiton (2021) found that, of more than 14,000 students aged 12–19 years old, the risk of self-harm was 3 times higher for bullies, 5 times for victims of bullying, and 6 times for bullies who were themselves victims, as compared to students who were neither bullies nor victims.
- Bullying affects more than just those involved in the conflict. It also undermines school culture, leading to lower academic performance for students and to job burnout for teachers and staff (Avivar-Cáceres et al., 2022).
- Studies show that traditional intervention programs such as peer mediation strategies are not as effective in combating bullying as schoolwide programs (Christensen, 2008; Gouveia et al., 2019). These schoolwide programs enforce antibullying policies, teach students conflict management skills, establish responsibilities for bystanders who observe bullying, and use restorative approaches to discipline (Gaffney et al., 2021; Whitted & Dupper, 2005; Wurf, 2021).
- Students may benefit from interventions focusing more on intrinsic aspirations than on extrinsic rewards (Lannin et al., 2022). Intrinsic aspirations, like personal growth and meaningful relationships, which allow for compromises, are positively associated with conflict resolution. “Extrinsic rewards may be perceived as limited resources, thus framing conflicts as opportunities to avoid loss of respect, rather than opportunities to compromise” (p. 3322).

Assessments:

- The Conflict Management Formative Questionnaire (7–12) (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2018) asks students to rate behaviors on a 5-point Likert-type scale from *Not Very Like Me* to *Very Like Me*. The questionnaire was designed for students in middle and high school. The items on the questionnaire are written at a sixth-grade reading level, per the Flesch-Kincaid readability score (Kincaid et al., 1975). The Conflict Management Formative Questionnaire should not be used as a pre/post measure. As students learn more about conflict management, their internal frame of

reference may shift, causing them to become more critical in their self-assessment; this phenomenon is called response shift bias (Bray et al., 1984; Drennan & Hyde, 2008). 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. 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 (Enlow et al., 2020) 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 lessons available for purchase at <https://www.cccframework.org/competency-lessons-and-student-workbooks/>. The test can be used as a pre/post measure prior to and after teaching the conflict management lessons.

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- The Conflict Management Styles Assessment (Adkins, 2006) is 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:

- 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 designed 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.
- 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/>.

- Guide students towards using cooperative conflict management strategies. When students work towards satisfying both themselves and the disagreeing party, they engage in cooperative activities such as "seeking opportunities of agreement, showing mutual trust, searching solutions for common goodness, establishing **empathy** with the other, [and] trying to understand and to be understood" (Ayas et al., 2010, p. 3546).
 - Remind students that to work through a conflict, they must address three components (Noonan et al., 2017):
 1. Know your natural response(s) to conflict(s). Think about whether you have one primary response to most conflicts (and if so, what it is) or if you respond differently in different contexts (e.g., siblings vs. authority figures). Even if you naturally gravitate towards one conflict management style, keep in mind that depending on the situation, you might need to use one of the other styles.
 2. Know the reason for the conflict and perspectives of everyone involved. Evaluate each specific conflict to better understand it before reacting. Try to determine if there's been a misunderstanding or miscommunication or if there's a history/background that is affecting the current situation. Try to empathize with the perspectives of everyone involved—put yourself in the other person's shoes.
 3. Take steps to manage the conflict. Use what you know about this specific conflict to figure out the best way to address it. Consider which of the conflict management styles is most appropriate and whether the situation calls for additional specific strategies, like using assertive statements or negotiating.
 - When assigning group projects, allow time before beginning for students to openly discuss conflicts that sometimes arise when working with others (Donahoe, 2018). "Groups are a natural and appropriate source of conflict from which students can learn because their participation is driven by personal goals for success that may potentially be hindered by their reliance on the participation of group mates" (p. 45). Although some teachers "advice against the divide and conquer method of students parceling out pieces of the assignment," Donahoe urges that teachers should create assignments so that "components are deeply interconnected, such that even when researched separately, a successful final draft requires collaboration and synthesis of the

components in the final analysis,” purposefully creating instances when students will have to work through any disagreements that might occur (p. 47).

- Integrate conflict management training in standard classes already taught to students. This will promote regular practice, which will enable effective retention of skills and empower students to **self-regulate** their behavior (Johnson & Johnson, 2004).
- Teaching Students to Prevent Bullying (Nast, n.d.) curriculum resources address identifying, confronting, and stopping bullying. This is a resource from the National Education Association 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.

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