

## ECE Communication



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*DR. TAMMY MARINO*



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Welcome to Leadership in Early Care and Education! We hope you find this text helpful, thought provoking, and affirming. We created this text to support learning in a couple of different. This text can

be used from start to finish, or as modules that you (the instructor or the student) select based on your learning outcomes.

We created this text with these principles in mind:

- Anyone can be a leader at any time. Leadership is not title specific and the field of Early Care and Education needs leaders from diverse background, experiences, and expertise.
- Leadership has an inherent set of responsibilities and leaders need to understand what those are and how to navigate them.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion are important topics and leadership should be grounded in them.
- Reflection is a key part of professional practice and should be encouraged and supported at all levels.
- It is important to represent a variety of contexts, individuals and scenarios.
- White space is important. How we interact with learning materials is important. We hope you will find our design effective.

Leaders in Early Childhood Education and K-12 Education exist at levels and take many different paths to leadership. Some receive formal education and while many find themselves in leadership roles because they have the most tenure. Most become leaders through a combination of education and experience – and all are woefully underprepared for what they experience.

These modules were designed to empower leaders at all levels and in any educational context. We realize that is a lofty goal and we felt it was important to aspire to ensure that all leaders could see themselves in the scenarios and strategies we share. We have been in leadership roles and know how challenging and complex leadership in education can be.

We created these modules with the understanding of the importance of several key leadership influences. We felt it was critical that the topic of leadership be intertwined with the topic of Ethics. Leaders set the tone and provide opportunities for ethical



behavior to thrive or to be silenced. We also developed this course material with an emphasis for diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is essential that leaders represent the stakeholders, families, and communities they serve. It is equally important that leaders are culturally responsive and tackle topics such as bias and systemic racism.

These modules are developed to celebrate the diverse leaders in the world of education and to empower new and existing leaders. Leadership can happen any place, in any position, and at any time. We are excited to support all students; wherever they may be on the leadership journey!

This text is part of a collaborative process and we want to encourage continued collaboration from our colleagues, students, and stakeholders. If you have information that you think is important to include please contact Tammy Marino at [tammy.marino@socc.edu](mailto:tammy.marino@socc.edu). Let's have a conversation!

Dr. Sally Guyon, Dr. Tammy Marino, Taya Noland, and Dr. Maidie Rosengarden

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# About the Author



## **Dr. Tammy Marino**

Dr. Tammy Marino earned her Education Doctorate in Organizational Leadership at Northcentral University. She has her MBA in Organizational and Leadership Development with a focus on training and adult development. She has been working in the field of early care and education for over 30 years;

supporting professionals and programs with consulting, coaching, and training. Dr. Marino is a national and international speaker with a focus on leadership development and presented over 35,000 hours of leadership and development training and coursework. Since 2009 she has been teaching at institutions of higher education in early childhood and elementary education programs. Dr. Marino has been teaching at Southwestern Oregon Community College since 2016 and at Clackamas Community College since 2009. She is passionate about leadership and professional development and designing and providing learning programs that are culturally and linguistically responsive.

# I.



## Learning Objectives

Objective 1 – Recognize how conflict can be viewed from the point of view of individuals, teams, and through the lens of systems of personal and professional values and beliefs.

Objective 2 – Create a conflict resolution plan for a common challenge in Early Care and Education.

Objective 3 – Explain how communication impacts conflict resolution.

Have you ever thought—they just don't listen to me! Or I have no idea why they would say that! Communication is nuanced, varied, and dependent on context and who we are communicating to. While there are whole courses dedicated to communication, we are going to focus on communication and how it relates to resolving conflict.



*Think about your communication skills. Reflect on your interactions with someone who you thought was a poor communicator. Why did you feel that person was a poor communicator? How was your communication received? What do you think makes you a good communicator?*

Let's start with some working definitions of communication. Communication includes speaking, listening, non-verbal communication such as tone or volume of your voice, and body language. Communication modes include written, verbal, video, and sky writing (only if you have the budget).

We generally prefer to receive communications in the same way

we choose to communicate with others. It is important to remember that everyone prefers different methods of communication. You may want to have a sit down, face-to-face conversation with someone who prefers to speak over the phone or in writing. Culture can also play a role in an individual's preferred communication style as well as personal experiences, values and belief systems. All of these facets can make communicating during conflict very challenging!

When we enter communications during conflict there are many opportunities for our intended messages to have quite a different impact on the other person. It is important to realize that we cannot control the way our message is received or how someone feels about it, but we can work hard to communicate our message effectively. Tension-reaction behavior can escalate poor communication and make it difficult to navigate conflict.

How can you use communication to resolve conflict? That is a great question! One of the most powerful communication tools you have is asking questions that can help you understand the other person's perspective as well as what the root cause of the conflict is about (resources, psychological needs, values).

#### **Closed-ended questions...**

- Confirm and clarify information—"I just want to confirm, you want me to arrive at 3pm. Correct?"
- Gather specific information—"Which color was the coat? Red or Blue?"
- Focus the conversation—"Can we speak about that tomorrow and focus on parent conferences today?"
- May be perceived as threatening—If your tone and non-verbals convey irritation or anger the questions can be perceived as negative.

#### **Open-ended questions...**

- Expand conversation—"That sounds interesting, can you tell

me more about your experience?”

- Gather information—“I understand she is not sleeping at nap time. Can you share with me what she is doing instead and what you have done to support her?”
- Involve others in the conversation—“I would love to learn more about your experience with the Smith family. How have your interactions with them been?”
- May not provide specific information—If the question is too open you may get a lot of information but not what you are needing.
- May change focus of conversation—As in the example about the experiences with the Smith family, the other person may start relaying an encounter at the library and not about interactions at the program.

#### Key Takeaway

NAEYC Code of Conduct states: “P-3A.2—When we have concerns about the professio

It can be tempting when dealing with conflict to seek advice from others. This is a normal part of being a nurturing and caring individual. Be cautious though and mindful of your ethical responsibility to your co-workers. By speaking directly with the person you have a conflict with you are showing respect and caring which can set the stage for a productive conflict resolution conversation!

## Three Parts to Communication

Now before you can say it—yes there are actually four parts to communication. As you may know, non-verbal communication is very important. How we say what we want to communicate is especially challenging during a conflict when tensions are high and non-verbals can give away

our true emotions. Non-verbal communications (tone of voice, facial expressions, body language) can turn a simple message of “I am fine” into a tense message of “I AM FINE!?!?”

The other three parts of communication are thinking, speaking, and listening.

### **Thinking**

Ever wanted to blurt something out and stopped yourself? That is the thinking part of communication.

Stop before you speak and...

- Consider the message. What is it you want them to know? What is the outcome you want from the conversation?
- Consider the person receiving the message. What impact might your communication have? What do you intend to happen? What format is the best for this person? In writing? Face to face?
- Consider the context and timing. You don't want to have a conversation about conflict during arrival time for children. Where you talk and when you talk are important. Make sure you have a quiet, private space and time to get into the conversation.

### **Listening**

We all think we listen until we find out we were not 😊. Listening is tricky because we typically listen to persuade or share our point of view. As you head into this portion of the communication process remember to...

1. Listen more to the other individual's point

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of view than share my own.

2. Listen to individuals who disagree with me as attentive as I do to those who agree with me.
3. Put aside other work and focus on the individual.
4. Listen without letting my mind wander.
5. Try to put myself in the other shoes and listen for feelings.
6. Ask the other what they mean if I don't fully understand.
7. Listen without interrupting, even when I anticipate what the individual is going to say.

## Speaking

This part seems pretty easy, right?! You just start talking! Effective speaking requires a few more pieces:

- Adjusting speaking tone and volume to the context and listener.
- Watching for signs the listener is not understanding and pausing or clarifying.
- Engaging the listener through questions or a back and forth exchange.
- Communication, especially during times of conflict, can often have different layers that we may not recognize right away. These layers are hidden dimensions that are present in every communication.

There are 3 dimensions to every communication.

**Content of Communication.** First there is the content of the communication. What exactly do you want to say? More importantly



is what is the communication about? During times of conflict and tension-reaction behavior we can struggle to fully articulate what we want the other person to know. Or we bring up information that is not relevant to the current conversation, creating confusion and in some cases hostility.



**Emotions.** Emotions can make communicating extremely difficult. Even when we think we are concealing our emotions about and during a communication it can still be revealing. During conflict it is usually best to state your feelings, e.g. “I feel frustrated...” etc. This way there is no dissonance between your verbal and non-verbal communications.

**Relationship/power.** We all speak differently to individuals depending on our relationship with them. Some of us defer to our supervisors, or we may find ourselves speaking tenderly to a small child. This dimension can be tricky when you are navigating conflict with a fellow staff member. Factors such as age, experience, education, or tenure can all influence how we approach our communications. For example, you may have a conversation with someone you consider a friend in one way and a completely different conversation with someone you consider a mentor. These positions of power or importance of relationships can create challenges through assumptions— “my friend will know what I want” to “I don’t think that is how I want to approach it but they are my mentor, so I guess I better.”



*Think back to the beginning of this section where you identified how you are an effective communicator—now that you understand more about the complexity of communication think about recent communication you had. What hidden dimensions were present? How did they or did they not influence your communication and the outcome of the communication?*

## Framework for Raising Difficult Issues

1. Opener: Agreement with yourself to have the conversation
2. I-Feeling Language: Only describe how you feel.
3. Practice speaking in positive language that normalizes the conflict and conveys a desire to work through the issue together.
4. Pinpoint specific details.
5. Acknowledge your part.
6. Agree on a solution: Develop a solution that you both create and implement.

Conflict is a natural part of life and working with children, families, and colleagues. As a professional it is our role to collaborate with others to resolve conflict and create opportunities to meet the needs of ourselves and those we work with. When we commit to acknowledging conflict and working through it we show respect and caring for ourselves and our team members. In the end, our nurturing and caring actions can support us in working through some of the tough issues that can come with working with children and families.

# Conflict

Conflict is a natural part of life. Conflict can create opportunities for innovation, or it can weigh down a team for months and months. Conflict is incredibly difficult to navigate because it often involves values and beliefs. Conflict is a natural part of life.

If conflict is so natural—why do most people avoid it? Because conflict can make us uncomfortable. Conflict can challenge our perceptions of what we know and invite us to grow and learn. Conflict forces us to consider change, and as we know, change is not always easy.



*What comes to your mind when you think about conflict? Write a list of the first words or phrases you think of. Reflect on a recent conflict with a peer or supervisor. How did you react to the conflict? What was the interaction like? Would you say you avoid conflict? Do you see conflict as natural?*

Conflict in Early Care and Education settings is often very different than conflict you may encounter in other parts of your life. Why? Because conflict in ECE settings can be complex.

1. The field of Early Care and Education is a caring and nurturing industry. This can translate to a lot of “polite” interactions where the team members don’t want to “upset” each other and so avoid having discussions or resolving issues that come up as a natural part of working together.
2. Conflict in these settings can be easy to avoid. With all of the things you have to do each day, there is a built-in excuse for not having that important conversation with another team member. A common thought is “It will go away in a little while if I don’t pay attention to it.”
3. Conflict can include multiple people at different levels in the organization. It can also just involve one person whose

perceptions are different from others. This can complicate communications, interactions, and opportunities to discuss and resolve the conflict.

4. Values and beliefs around conflict and how it should be viewed and resolved can increase the complexity for everyone involved.

It can be tempting with this many influences to simply ignore the conflict and hope it goes away. Unfortunately, these unexpressed feelings don't die; they are pushed down and can come up at the wrong times and in the worst ways. When we view conflict as something that needs to be avoided and ignored it erodes trust and respect and sabotages productivity.

**Consider this:**

- Conflict is a result of someone's need not being met. "Why did that teacher get their planning time today and I didn't?"
- If the issue is not resolved, tensions increase until someone reacts. "That is so unfair! I am going to tell her she can do the snack dishes today because she had PLENTY of time to lesson-plan!!"
- When reactions occur, this is called tension-reaction behavior. We react in a way we might not have had tensions not been so high.
- This cycle drains energy and reduces productivity. "I am not going to bother trying to plan for my children, I never get planning time anyway."

**Tension-reaction behavior** is most difficult to control when it is directed at someone personally: ("That is so unfair! I am going to tell her she can do the snack dishes today because she had PLENTY of time to plan a lesson!!"). When two people are in tension-reaction behavior communication breaks down and can become controlled by emotions and perceptions.

# Causes of Conflict and Strategies to Resolve Them

## Access to Resources

### Values

One thing to note! Each conflict has a life cycle and will continue to cycle and escalate until it is resolved. Because conflict is rooted in an unmet need, as long as that need continues to not be met, the conflict will be harder and harder to avoid. Let's think of conflict from this angle—You are working with a 3-year-old who cries a lot because they are tired (they don't sleep at naptime) or are hungry (they frequently miss breakfast in the morning). You can ignore the crying, but eventually you will need to do something to support that child (nap, hugs, food etc.). In this example, the conflict is the 3-year-old. You can ignore the crying and sometimes the child will stop for a bit but eventually you will have a full melt-down on your hands.



*Think about a recent conflict you have had. Was it about access to resources, psychological needs, or values? What were the tension-reaction behaviors involved? Was it resolved? How or why not?*

## Access to Resources

This cause of conflict is the most frequent and usually the easiest to navigate. Access to resources can include time, tangible things, or access to relationships. With so many things that need to be done in a day, time is a huge resource for most of us. Having access to the things you need in order to get your tasks done is also a common cause of conflict. Whether it is art supplies, dramatic play materials, or playground equipment, not having enough resources to support our work can be incredibly difficult and filled with tension-reaction behavior!

Strategies:

- Take a breath
- Gather more information
- Determine what your actual need is. Not what you think you need.
- Discuss with the person who controls the resource the best way for your need to be met and or advocate for someone else who may need the resource.

### **Psychological Needs**

Psychological needs include the need for working independently, knowing that your skills are recognized, and having positive relationships with those you work with. As educators we need to know we can make decisions and act independently in a way that is appropriate for our position. If you are constantly being micro-managed and have to ask permission for basic things this may cause conflict. Effective leaders need to remember that team members were hired for their competence and abilities. When they are not able to use those skills to do their job it can be very difficult. This then impacts the relationships they have with each other, families, and leadership causing tension-reaction behavior.

Strategies:

- Ask questions such as What is your need?
- Is the other person aware of the impact of their actions?
- Discuss your concerns directly with the staff member or your supervisor.

### **Values**

Sometimes conflict arises from what you value vs. what someone

else values. For example, if your coworker values a clean classroom and you value child independence, these two values can cause conflict. Your coworker may come along behind children and clean things up for them while you encourage children to clean things up for themselves (which is often not as clean as a teacher would).

Sometimes it is about belief systems and how you view your work. You may believe that families are important partners and meet with parents to discuss their goals for their child and provide updates. Your coworker may believe that families are important but they don't know as much as an educator and have conversations with parents about what they need to do at home to support their child's development. Neither perspective is completely wrong. Both might lead to conflict.

Values can be about beliefs, ethics, morals, culture and all of the things that make us who we are...which is why it is more impactful and harder to navigate. Values can put you in direct conflict with someone else or, as is usually the case, be a slow simmer until things bubble over into something big. When values get tangled up in conflict tensions can rise!

Strategies:

- Don't try to "win" the other person over.
- Be clear with your beliefs and your perceptions—what story are you telling yourself? \*Brene Brown
- Ask questions and seek to understand.
- Offer kindness and respect.
- Look for ways to negotiate.



## Example

Scenario: You are working with a teacher who has recently begun to withdraw and doesn't really initiate activities with the children. You have reminded them a few times about what they should be doing but they continue to not engage with children. You feel angry and frustrated and not sure what to do next. What should you do?

1. Start by thinking about your perception. Are they really not engaging or are they just not engaging in the way you want them to? Perhaps ask someone else to observe the teacher and offer you objective feedback.
2. Set aside time and ask them questions—how are they feeling? How do they think things are going? Do they have questions or challenges? Get as much information as you can.
3. Offer kindness and respect. Let them know you are listening and care about them and resolving this issue.
4. Once you understand the issue you can begin to build a solution for you and the other teacher. Perhaps the teacher feels unsure about how to handle challenging behavior. Or maybe they are unsure what to do next once an activity gets started. By talking and starting from a place of understanding you can create a solution that works for both of you.



Let's think of conflict from this angle—You are working with a 3 year old who cries a lot because they are tired (they don't sleep at naptime) or are hungry (they frequently miss breakfast in the morning). You can ignore the crying but eventually you will need to do something to support that child (nap, hugs, food etc.) In this example, the conflict is the 3-year-old. You can ignore the crying and sometimes the child will stop for a bit but eventually you will have a full melt-down on your hands.



*Think about a recent conflict you have had. Was it about access to resources, psychological needs, or values? What were the tension-reaction behaviors involved? Was it*

*resolved? How or why not?*

## Steps to Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution takes practice and time to develop your skills. Remember—every conflict is different and contains many different pieces. If you approach each conflict with the same strategies, you will not be successful. Just like no two toddlers are potty-trained in the same way, there are still some predictable patterns and successful strategies that you can apply.

The good news is that there is a pattern to

### Key Takeaway

One thing to note! Each conflict has a life cycle and will continue to cycle and escalate until it is resolved. Because conflict is rooted in an unmet need, as long as that need continues to not be met, the

conflict  
will be  
harder  
and  
harder  
to avoid.

resolving conflicts and you can use this framework in all scenarios.

1. **Analyze the conflict and the sources.** What do you think is happening? Why do you think that? Write down your thoughts and take time to reflect on the conflict and your beliefs about the conflict.
2. **Set the Scene.** Provide a quiet and private place away from children to talk about the conflict.

Minimizing distractions allows both of you an opportunity to focus on listening and communicating.

3. **Ask open ended questions.** These may be hard questions, but they show a willingness to understand the other person's point of view. Be willing to listen for all parts of the communication (we will learn more about this in the communication section). If you don't spend enough time learning about the conflict and expressing yourself, you run a risk of not finding the right solution!
4. **Communicate, communicate, and communicate some more!** All parties should have an opportunity to listen and be heard. Commit to being authentic and honest in your communications. It is your job as a leader to support this process. Allow individuals to take breaks if needed. Talking about conflict can be very challenging for some and easy for others. Make sure you are offering an equal opportunity for all to engage in the process.
5. **Manage Big Emotions.** Communicating can raise big feelings from frustration and anger to sadness for both of you. Be prepared to take a break and agree to re-engage at a later time or to simply pause to allow time to process. Conflict is hard and can often surprise us in how it can make us feel.
6. **Focus on the future state.** Yes, how we got to the current conflict is important to know. Then—focus on what each of you wants and needs and the best methods for achieving those

goals.

7. **Identify the agreed-upon resolution and create a timeline for implementation.** Sometimes conflict cannot be resolved with an “easy” fix. Make sure you and the other person knows what steps need to be taken, who is responsible, and the timeline for each step. It is important to include a follow-up conversation to ensure the solution has resolved the conflict.

## Creative Problem Solving

Most conflicts can be resolved with a little creative problem solving. Conflict might not always feel good to begin with, but when we authentically bring our best selves to the table with open hearts and minds, it can turn into not only a satisfying experience, but the foundation for partnerships that last a lifetime.

There are five steps to the creative problem-solving process. Each step can be done individually or collaboratively as a group.

1. The first step is to take a deep breath and describe the problem in your own words. Then ask yourself—what else do I need to know? Who can give me those answers?
2. Next, after you have done some research, revise or restate the problem and determine what your objective is. What do you want to happen? How is that different from what is happening now?
3. Brainstorm possible resolutions. How could this conflict be resolved? Is there something you have not thought about before?
4. Review the list of possibilities and weigh the advantages and disadvantages to each possibility until you have narrowed it down to one that feels acceptable.
5. Finally, as a team, decide ways to implement the solution, who might be involved, what is the timeline and how will you know

if it was a success or not?

### **Let's take creative problem solving for a test run!**

Issue: Lunch is being delivered late to the classrooms. Everyone is frustrated because children are hungry and late lunch means late nap time. The kitchen staff are frustrated because they are working as hard as they can. Yikes!

1. Breathe! What else do we need to know? Some possible questions include—how late is late? How often is it happening? Are there other contributing factors? Who is all involved?

Through your careful questioning, you discover that it is happening almost daily and that the delay is 10-20 minutes. In addition, you discover that the dishes from the snack are not making it back to the kitchen in a timely manner (someone usually takes them back eventually but it is no one person's responsibility).

2. The problem is that the one set of dishes that are used for all snacks and meals are not making it back to the kitchen in time to be washed, sanitized and ready for lunch service. This causes lunch to be delayed.
3. Working as a team you brainstorm possible solutions including: using disposable dishes for morning snack, having one person collect all of the dishes before a certain time, have each classroom designate someone to take the dishes back at a certain time, only offer morning snacks that don't need dishes, or something else we have not thought of.
4. & 5. Weighing these options we decide that we don't like disposable dishes because of the impact to the environment and it is not reasonable to only offer snacks that don't need dishes. The team settles on a solution that involves getting the dishes back by a certain time each day. After careful consideration the team decides that while they would like to have someone from each class take them back—that is part of

the problem right now. Therefore, the group decides that the break person will change the break schedule to allow them to collect all of the dishes and bring them back by 9:45am each day. We agree to check in at the end of the week to see if it is working.

As you can tell from this example, the issues started off as kitchen staff as the cause for the issue and upon further investigation the realization that the issue was a bit more complex. When we stop to ask questions and get to the root of an issue, we are more likely to come up with a solution that meets everyone's needs and is long lasting. It can be easy to fall into a cycle of blame that doesn't support anyone or really solve an issue.

**Communication is key in resolving conflicts!**



This is where you can add appendices or other back matter.