

# Teaching the skills of peace

More elementary and preschools are going beyond “conflict resolution” to teach positive social behavior

By Claudia Miller

Susan Hopkins remembers back 30 years ago, when she was a teacher of four-year-olds. Two boys were arguing over a toy. Just before it escalated into a fist fight, she descended on them with the popular refrain, “use your words!”

“Immediately, one of the boys turned to the other and said, ‘you poo-poo head, you stink!’” Hopkins says. “He turned to me with a big smile on his face, he was so proud of himself. It really struck me at that point that we weren’t giving children the tools they needed to get along with each other.”

Today Hopkins, a Nevada City resident, is an organizer of Peace Camps, run by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. Peace Camps teach preschool and elementary-school children positive attitudes and skills—empathy, cooperation, anger-management, and problem-solving, along with awareness of the environment and of international peace.

Recently more educators have realized the importance of going beyond “conflict resolution” to teach positive social skills—and the importance of starting younger. Two well-known programs, Second Step and PeaceBuilders, have developed preschool as well as school-age curricula, and recently they’ve added resources for families.

“These social and emotional skills are just as important for children to learn as academic skills,” says Joan Duffell, Second Step director of communication. “It’s important for parents to understand that there are ways they can help at home.” Educators and parents offer some key pointers.

## Model the kind of behavior you’d like to see in your children.

When teaching children social and emotional skills, “do as I say, not as I do,” just doesn’t cut it. Parents can teach their children caring behavior by helping an elderly relative, volunteering in schools, or being kind to a new neighbor. Julie Carrara of Nevada City says she regularly takes along her four boys when she volunteers at the local food bank “because I want them to know that it’s important to me and our family.”

## Monitor television viewing or video games.

“We can talk all we want about conflict resolution, empathy, and cooperation, but that’s not what our children see on television,” says Wendy McCraney-Matz, a family therapist and early childhood educator in Salinas. She’s involved in ACT (Adults and Children Together) Against Violence, a new collaboration between the American Psychological Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children that’s working to educate parents and caregivers on problem-solving, anger management, and media literacy.

“We need to talk with our children about what they’re seeing on TV,” says

McCraney-Matz. “Parents need to teach their children to be critical thinkers, asking them, ‘what do you think would really happen if you got hit with a big sledgehammer? What are other ways he could have solved the problem?’”

## Praise positive social behavior right away.

At Estrella Family Services in San Jose, teachers write “praise notes” to children who treat others with kindness, share toys, or solve conflicts peacefully. That’s one strategy of PeaceBuilders, the violence-prevention program used at Estrella. Irene Burgos, a teacher of four- and five-year-olds, says, “When I notice a child helping another child who’s fallen on the playground, it’s important to let them know that what they’ve done is special.”

Three of Victoria Alarcon’s five children have participated in PeaceBuilders at Estrella and she says she has noticed a big change in their behavior. “The praise notes are something simple and easy to do at home,” she says. “When I recognize one of [my children] for doing something that we appreciate, they really feel happy.” Alarcon gives praise for helping a younger sibling, helping mom clean the house, and doing homework without being asked.

## Think of conflict as an opportunity to listen and learn, rather than a negative.

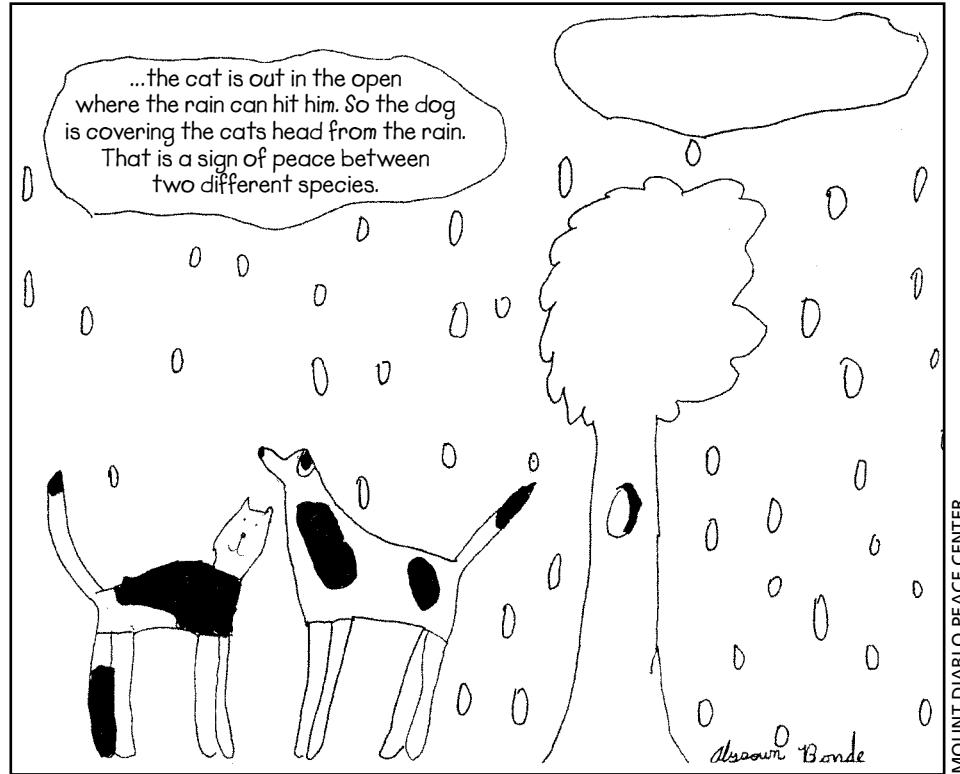
Millee Livingston of Auburn, one of the creators of Peace Camps, helped develop a “peace table,” a neutral place where children can meet to discuss conflicts with a mediator. “At home, parents can designate a special area where disputes are resolved. Children quickly realize that by going to this place, they will have a chance to speak and be heard and then figure out a way to solve the conflict,” she says.

## To build empathy, teach children words to express their feelings.

Children have the capacity to see when another person is hurting, says Marie Dellahaye, who created a half-day course for parents, “Raising Peaceful Children,” at the Mt. Diablo Peace Center in Walnut Creek. “As parents, it’s important to give children the vocabulary to understand their own and others’ feelings, no matter how unpleasant they may be.”

When parents insist that children say, “I’m sorry” when they’re not, “We’re telling them to express a feeling that they really don’t feel,” says Dellahaye. Instead, parents could have the child figure out what would make the hurt child feel better. For example, a child who has hit another child could get a band-aid, give the injured child a hug, or read him a book. “Young children aren’t always ready to be entirely empathetic, but they can identify feelings with help from parents,” Dellahaye says.

Jan Geyer, a Pleasant Hill parent of a nine-year-old daughter, says that in



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## How to solve problems

Ask yourself (and everyone involved):

1. What is the problem? (In a conflict, let each person talk about his/her view.)
2. What are some solutions? (Brainstorm together.)
3. For each solution, ask: Is it safe? Is it fair? How might people feel? Will it work?
4. Choose a solution and use it.
5. Is it working? If not, think about what you can do now.

Based on materials from Second Step.

Dellahaye’s class, she learned that “in order to show empathy, children have to experience empathy. I really try to give that to my daughter by listening to her and then feeding back to her what I think she’s saying.”

## Think about what kind of adult you’d like to see your child become.

In the midst of the hustle and bustle of daily life, says peace educator Susan Hopkins, parents need to look for opportunities to “intentionally talk to their children about their values. That means parents have to give some thought ahead of time to what they believe in and then seek out those ‘teachable moments.’” For example, Joanna Lamnaouar, a teacher at the Daisy Child Development Center in Oakland, told a group of preschoolers who were trying to capture and squish bugs during playtime, “We don’t hurt bugs when they’re outside because that’s their home.”

“Lecturing is pretty useless for young children,” Hopkins adds, “but if parents have their values clearly in place, they can articulate them when the moment arises.”

## RESOURCES FOR POSITIVE SOCIAL EDUCATION

**PeaceBuilders**, 877-4PEACENOW (877-473-2238), [www.PeaceBuilders.org](http://www.PeaceBuilders.org)

**Second Step**, c/o Committee for Children, 800-634-4449, [www.cfchildren.org](http://www.cfchildren.org)

**Mt. Diablo Peace Center**, 925-933-7850

**Estrella Family Services**, 408-998-1343

**Peace Camps**, c/o Susan Hopkins, 530-274-1862

**California Association for the Education of Young Children**, 916-486-7750, [www.caeyc.org](http://www.caeyc.org)

**ACT Against Violence**, c/o National Association for the Education of Young Children, (202) 232-8777, [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)