



The desire for the same toy brings out an aggressive reaction in Fran, though she instantly tries to make amends by hugging Lauren

Initially, Lauren rejects Fran's attempts at peace-making by turning her back on Fran. But then Fran's suggestion of a new game wins Lauren over.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# When friends fall out

While children will squabble from time to time, they are usually practising negotiating techniques. The skill for adults is to know when to step in or step back and let them get on with it, explains *Anne O'Connor*

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Fran and Lauren are happily playing together. They are chatting away and appear to be enjoying each other's company. That is, until they both reach for the same toy and an argument ensues.

Fran reacts and hits Lauren. She instantly realises that Lauren is hurt and offended, so tries to make friends. Fran then apologises and gives Lauren a cuddle. But Lauren is still upset and shows Fran that she is not yet ready to make up by turning away from her.

Fran is disgruntled at first that her apology didn't work, but doesn't give up and tries a different approach. She suggests a new game to which Lauren responds, and they are soon happily playing together again.

Although it was Fran's initial aggressive reaction that had caused the situation, she showed considerable social intelligence in recognising the need to negotiate a way through the problem in order to make amends with Lauren and so restore the relationship.

Neither Lauren nor Fran called on an adult to take over and solve the problem for them. They were both learning about the value of negotiation and the need to move to a resolution rather than blame.

**GOOD PRACTICE**

Anyone spending time with children knows that arguments over the possession of toys are very common. Understanding the neuroscience and brain chemistry behind it all can make a big difference to the interventions and strategies we use to solve these kinds of conflicts.

- When there is an emotional attachment to a toy, it releases chemicals called opioids in the brain, which means that the child has a sense of well-being when they are playing with the toy. Take it away and the brain is likely to experience 'opioid withdrawal' and this causes emotional pain, which is often expressed through crying.
- The child might feel a territorial claim over the toy. Vasopressin is the brain chemical linked to aggression and is released when 'territory' is invaded, which explains why children often attack or hit each other in arguments about possessions or space.
- Our brains are made up of three regions, the core reptilian brain, the lower mammalian brain and the higher human brain, which is the one capable of rational

thought. Early positive and stimulating experiences help to build up these frontal lobes in children. However, until these lobes are sufficiently developed, children will need adults to help them solve problems.

Just as importantly, adults need to model calm responses to conflict situations, so we need to regulate our own reactions when we intervene.

Don't wade in with an angry reaction when children are squabbling. What is needed is a soothing voice and calm body language to help regulate heated emotions and bring children to an emotional space where they can begin to think.

Be honest with them about how painful and scary it can be to have to share things, rather than focusing on the 'morality' of sharing. Remember very young children will find it hard to empathise or rationalise – their instinctive lower brain will be in the driving seat - so it is unfair to punish or chastise a child for the immaturity of their brain.

With an older child whose higher brain is more developed, it is still important to support and coach them as they experiment with negotiating. Better still, observe, wait and listen before reacting. Give children the space to experiment with both negotiating and problem-solving, just as Fran and Lauren did, and only intervene when asked or when the situation warrants it.

3 'Now say sorry' is a traditional adult response to a conflict situation with children. All too often it is a knee-jerk reaction, masquerading as good manners or linked to a moral code.

It is worth asking what real purpose this comment serves, particularly with very young children for whom it is often meaningless, or when it becomes a bone of contention if they refuse to say it.

For 'sorry' to mean something, it has to leave the recipient feeling better. If it doesn't, then a more appropriate form of apology or atonement is needed. Both Fran and Lauren showed their understanding of this.

Help children to make sense of this by asking them what they would like to (not 'should') say to each other and provide possible models if needed. Examples are 'I didn't like it when you took my teddy, but I know it wasn't good to hit you' and 'It hurt when you hit me, but I know you were cross with me for taking your teddy.'

4 Encourage them to express how they are feeling and you will build an emotional vocabulary that will help children to develop their emotional literacy and social intelligence.

- Remember, compromise and negotiation are sophisticated skills that many adults struggle with, and the roots of these difficulties often lie with our early experiences.



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- *The Science of Parenting: Practical Guidance on Sleep, Crying, Play and Building Emotional Wellbeing for Life* by Margot Sunderland (Dorling Kindersley)
- *Nursery World's* pull-out series on child development by Maria Robinson appeared in 22 November, 20/27 December 2007, 24 January, 28 February, 27 March, 24 April, 22 May 2008. The next part is in 24 July.
- *Nursery World's* series on Attachment appeared in 11 October, 8 November, 13 December 2007, and 10 January, 14 February 2008.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The stills are from Siren Films' *Falling Out*. For more information, visit Siren Films at [www.sirenfilm.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilm.co.uk) or call 0191 232 7900

- Secure attachments, positive relationship experiences and caring role models in the early years are needed to build pathways between the lower and higher brains. These can then work in well co-ordinated ways to enable the development of high-level human functions such as empathy, negotiation, compromise, compassion and co-operation.
- Unfortunately, for all sorts of reasons, some children might not have had the kinds of role models or attachment experiences we would wish for them and are likely to have difficulty sharing or being co-operative. Given the knowledge we now have about the way the brain needs these experiences in order to develop, it is important that we don't make judgements about children being selfish or 'old enough to know better', when they repeatedly display behaviours of this kind.
- Think, instead, about how their behaviour is communicating to us their stage of brain development and what responses (and future experiences) are more likely to help move them deal with similar situations and enable them to grow into socially intelligent adults. ■



LINKS TO EYFS GUIDANCE

- **UC 1.2** Inclusive practice
- **PR 2.3** Supporting learning
- **L&D 4.3** Creativity and critical thinking