

## Peer disputes among preschoolers: Issues and strategies

著者	Lokon Elizabeth
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## Peer Disputes among Preschoolers: Issues and Strategies

Elizabeth Lokon

こどものけんか・口げんかを制止する親や教師を見ることは稀ではない。こどものけんか等は止めるべきだと信じているからである。しかし、幼児期のけんか等がこどもの発達と友達づくりに欠かせないと研究者は考えているのである。本稿は口げんかを予告する行動を類別して報告し、3歳から5歳までの就学前の児童に実際に試みられたこれら口げんかを解決する方法について述べるものである。参加観察法を主として親へのインタビュー資料で不足を補う方法を用いた。その結果、これまでこどもの口げんかを分析するのに使われて来た枠組みには不足があると論ずることになった。友達と口げんかをしている幼児の創造的で想像力に富む能力は過小評価されてきた。ここでいう分析の枠組みの不足を補う方法にもついても述べる。

It is not uncommon to hear teachers and parents tell young children to stop fighting or bickering with one another. These parents and teachers believe that conflict between young children should be prevented, avoided, or squelched. Early childhood researchers, however, believe that conflicts are essential for the development and socialization of young children. This paper reports types of antecedent events that precipitate disputes and strategies aimed at resolving these disputes as applied by twenty-four preschoolers, aged 3-5 years. The method used was participant observation supplemented by parent interviews. In conclusion, it is argued here that one of the traditional frameworks used to analyze disputes among young children is too limited. Young children's creative, imaginative, and anticipatory capabilities in dealing with peer disputes have been underestimated. Specific ways to expand this framework are suggested.

### Introduction

**A**s a preschool teacher, I have seen three, four and five-year-old children solve peer disputes in the most imaginative ways. Once, a three-year-old boy accidentally bumped a girl on the head with a plastic shovel that caused the girl to cry. After consoling both children, I asked the boy whether he would give the girl a hug to make her feel better. His reply was, "no, but I like to give her some money sometime." Bribing is only one of many strategies that preschool children use when they attempt to resolve conflicts and disputes over toys, supplies, friendships, etc.

### Objective

For many children, preschool is one of the first environments where they have to learn to get along with others besides their own siblings and a few neighborhood friends. For the first time they learn, practice and invent ways to negotiate disagreements with other children. In this study, I wanted to systematically document the variety of strategies that preschool children use to solve peer disputes. I wanted to know what events precipitated the disputes and how preschool children handle the disputes.

### Rationale

Most disputes among young children benefit their development. Conflicts or disputes tend to arise from "incompatible behaviors or goals within an interpersonal context" (Furman & McQuaid, 1992, p. 402). Though some parents and educators

may seem to perceive conflicts between young children as something to be prevented, avoided, or squelched, researchers have found many positive functions of conflicts.

Piaget (1932) believed conflicts among young children foster a better understanding of others, thereby reducing egocentrism. In agreement with Piaget, Shantz & Hobart (1989) wrote that through conflicts children will have increased opportunity to learn both social connectedness and individuality. Rizzo (1992) found in his observations that conflicts provided children with the opportunity to work out the terms of their relationships. This implied that conflicts were vital to the cultivation of friendships. Through conflicts "children gained unique insight into their own actions and role as a friend" (p. 104). He further argued that some peer disputes between friends were initiated to induce positive changes in their friends' behavior. Ross and Conant (1992) agreed with Rizzo and believed that conflicts "hold great potential both for individual development and for the social organization of relationships and a group structure" (p. 153). Consistent with Rizzo's position, Furman & McQuaid (1992) in their discussion of conflicts within a family context stated that conflicts provided "open communication and lead to the clarification of the rights and obligations of different family members" (p. 403). Furthermore, verbal arguments seemed to help children recognize the perspective of another child (Ross & Conant, 1992). In short, conflicts are essential for the development and socialization of young children.

Although not all conflicts are necessarily constructive, all of the incidents observed in this study are of the constructive type. I did not make a decision to observe only constructive conflicts. Rather, it so happened that no destructive disputes occurred while I was in the field and none were reported by the parents interviewed.

I used Furman & McQuaid's (1992) distinction between constructive and destructive conflicts. According to Furman & McQuaid, the following indexes signal destructive conflicts:

- Conflicts occur frequently and constitute a high portion of the interaction.
- Conflicts tend to escalate and cover a rather long period.
- There is a consistent avoidance of conflicts or consistent use of withdrawal and disengagement strategies.

None of the thirty-two incidents observed at Kid First displayed the above signals. Therefore, I believe that conflicts observed and reported in this study served the positive functions mentioned earlier. It makes sense then, to look deeper into the components of such conflicts and find out what really happens when two or more preschoolers have a conflict.

## **Methodology**

### **Site**

This study was done at the Kid First preschool in a small university town in the Midwestern United States. I used to teach at Kid First. I left teaching there to become a full-time graduate student. To help the children make the transition to the new teacher, I volunteered at Kid First once or twice a week. I chose Kid First as the

site of my study because I enjoyed going there (I volunteered even after I resigned). I also expected that entry would be unproblematic since I knew everyone in that school. My expectation was confirmed when the study was approved without delay.

Kid First is a parent-owned cooperative nursery school. This means that about once a month parents come in to assist the teacher with teaching, playing and cleaning tasks. They are also required to serve on either the board or one of the four committees: physical plant, new member recruitment, teacher helper or fund raising. Two different cooperating parents serve as teacher's aides each day. These "co-opping" parents take turns bringing snack and juice and stay with the children the entire school day, which begins at nine in the morning and ends at about noon.

### **Participants**

Kid First serves two groups of children. The younger group consists of six boys and six girls, aged three and four. They go to school twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday mornings from nine to about noon. The older children, ages four and five, go to school three mornings a week on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. There are four girls and eight boys in the older group. I had known these children for almost two years. Before the study, I taught the older children nine hours per week for seventeen months. I taught the younger children six hours per week for five months.

When I sent out a letter soliciting parents' participation in the study (see Appendix A), three parents volunteered to be interviewed. I have known these parents as long as I have known their children. Since this is a cooperative preschool, I came to know all the children's parents quite well. Parents came in every morning to drop off and pick up their children and most of them stayed for the first half hour each morning. They also stayed the entire morning at least once a month to help me with various tasks. Occasionally, I spent the entire morning with them more than once a month if they came to help with field trips, which occurred about once a month. With such familiarity, trust was not an issue. The interviewing process was smooth and they were very open to tell me real stories of real disputes that they had witnessed at home and at school.

### **Data Gathering**

I was a participant observer in both classes for the second half of the school year, going in once or twice per week for four months. I watched both sets of twelve children during my stay there and conducted unstructured interviews with the three parents who volunteered to participate in this study.

Since the children knew me as their "other teacher" and I ethically felt that I was first and foremost a volunteer there, not an outside researcher, I was always actively engaged with the children. Only after the day was over, did I write down notes. I realized how this active engagement might have affected the trustworthiness of my study. However, I felt that to suddenly distance myself from these children, who had known me for almost two years, for the sake of the study was not at all ethical. Furthermore, I agreed with Meltzoff (1990) who believed that any alteration or distortion of events due to active participation was balanced by the greater understanding gained because of the close relationship with the children studied.

The parents were interviewed once at their homes for one to five hours. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. I began each interview by stating the purpose of my study: to learn how children get along with other children. Then I asked them to tell me stories about their children that might help me better understand their children's relationships with other children, siblings and friends. I intentionally cast the question broadly so that discussions about peer disputes could occur more naturally within the larger context of peer relations. The interviews ended in two different ways. The first and last interviews ended because it seemed that we had run out of relevant stories. The second interview ended because we ran out of time.

### Terminology

Before analyzing information gathered in this study, it is useful to first explore the concept of "disputes." Rizzo (1992) suggests that we distinguish aggressive acts (physical or verbal) from social conflicts. Aggressive acts are aimed at injuring another person while social conflicts are understood as one person opposing another's actions or statements. The participants' goal in social conflicts is to "overcome each other's resistance" (Rizzo, 1992, p. 94). In this study, no such distinction will be made because it is not possible to accurately assess motives behind actions of three to five year old preschoolers. For instance, a child who intentionally pushes another child may do it to either injure the other child (aggressive act) or to overcome the other's refusal to give up a desired toy, in other words to overcome the other's resistance (social conflict). Indeed, the context of their interaction may help explain their motives, but I believe that without adequate video-recording, such distinction may at times be arbitrary. As a result, in this study, disputes are understood as both aggressive acts and social conflicts.

According to Ross and Conant (1992), a dispute "begins with overt opposition between individuals and continues until opposition ceases" (p. 154). This overt opposition is called an "arguable event," which is understood as "the behavior, request or statement that is challenged" (p. 155). For simplicity, I have used the term "issues" in place of "arguable events." The arguable event or issue is generally followed by "initial and mutual oppositions" (p. 155) where a variety of strategies are applied. Finally, the conflict ends either because it has been resolved or because one or both parties drop the case. In addition to such full-blown disputes, I have chosen to include brief oppositional encounters in my definition of disputes. Brief oppositional encounters are disputes where objections or protests are unrefuted. Though some researchers excluded brief oppositional encounters in their study of disputes (Maynard, 1985; Shantz, 1987), I am not alone in my inclusion of brief oppositional encounters in the study of disputes (see for example Hay & Ross, 1982).

Since the purpose of this study is to document, not to assess, the variety of strategies that children use in peer dispute situations, I will not compare the strategies in terms of their effectiveness in affecting the outcomes of the disputes.

To sum up, disputes are preceded by an antecedent event (issue or arguable event), followed by various acts to deal with the event (strategies), and end with or without a resolution. Issues and strategies are the two "thinking units" (Hofmann, 1995, p. 6) used to guide the analysis of text (observational data and interview

transcripts) in this study. I have used the term "dispute" interchangeably with "conflict" and "disagreement" in this paper.

### **Analysis**

In analyzing the text, first I broke down the entire text into textual units by identifying each dispute incident, from beginning to end, as a textual unit. For the sake of data management, I gave each textual unit a title. There were thirty-two dispute incidents all together.

Then, I went through the entire text and used a line-by-line coding approach in which I identified on the margins what each line was about. Through this process I arrived at a variety of topics. I looked for duplication of topics and overlapping meanings in an attempt to ensure that each topic was unique. Labels were then given to name the final set of topics. With these labels in mind I went through the data again and color-coded segments of the text (conceptual textual segments) that corresponded to each topic. Then, I created a separate column for each topic with the topic name as the head of the column and its corresponding color-coded segments from the text as column entries. This was a way for me to keep track of the meaning of each topic as illustrated by the actual text.

Finally, I considered the list of topics again and tried to group them into larger categories by combining similar topics. I also read other conflict studies (Collins & Laursen, 1992; Corsaro, 1985; Horowitz, Boardman, Redlener, 1994; Ross & Conant, 1992; Smetana, 1991) to compare and adjust my categories of issues, strategies and interventions. I adopted and expanded the categories proposed by some of these conflict researchers. This process resulted in: (1) two categories of issues (conflict of interests and unwanted physical contact) that lead to peer-disputes and (2) four categories of strategies that the children used in dealing with these disputes (assertion, conciliation attempts, third party intervention, and disengagement).

## **Interpretation**

### **Description**

#### **1. Issues**

Issues are antecedent events that precipitate disputes. I found two types of issues that lead to peer disputes among preschoolers.

#### **Conflict of interests.**

Conflict of interests occurs when both or all parties want the same "thing." The "things" disputed over may or may not be tangible objects. Disputes may happen over property (toys), territory, turn-taking, winner status in games, and attention or friendship status. In cases where the disputants want different "things," the conflict of interests lies in controlling the outcome or choice made in that particular situation. Over two-thirds of the issues observed fall in this category. Below are some examples:

- Bud grabbed the firefighter hat from Brian's head (property, 2/9/95).

- Rani said she'd get in trouble if she's caught on the top bunk [her sister's bed] without asking (territory, 4/5/95).
- Bud pushed Terry off the slide so that he could have a turn (turn-taking, 2/16/95).
- Terry complained, "I want to sit by Johnny but he didn't let me" (friendship, 2/16/95).
- Ian wanted to watch Power Rangers, Jane wasn't interested. She pranced around, making Ian nervous (control, 4/4/95).

Although there seemed to be quite a variety of issues as described above, I have grouped them together because they all centered on the issue of who finally got to control the outcome of the situation. This was the primary factor that distinguished the first set of issues from the one below.

### **Unwanted physical contact.**

Unwanted physical contact includes both negative contact (pushing, hitting) and positive contact (hugging, kissing). These contacts may be executed knowingly by an aggressor without provocation or unknowingly in rough-housing incidents. Most of the incidents in this category involved the same child, Bud, who seemed to enjoy physical contact more than his peers. He intentionally ran into other children or hugged them unexpectedly as a way of initiating social contact. Control of the outcome was not apparently central in these incidents.

## **2. Strategies**

Strategies are actions that immediately follow an issue and are aimed at resolving or ceasing the opposition. Though the term "strategy" may seem to imply conscious planning by the executor of the strategy, a strategy may or may not be consciously planned. A strategy may simply be a reaction to an antecedent event, such as crying after being hit. I would argue in this case that crying is a strategy, even though it is not consciously planned, because the crying, in addition to expressing pain, is also aimed at ceasing the hitting or resolving the dispute.

I observed four distinct categories of strategies that preschool children used in their attempts to resolve peer disputes. Each category is unique and is made up of several different strategies (see Tables 1-4). More than one strategy may be used simultaneously in a single dispute.

**Table 1**  
**Assertion Strategies**

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verbalizing desire ("I want it.")</li> <li>• Verbalizing protest (with no justification: "Stop it"; with justification: "You pushed me, you're bad.")</li> <li>• Verbalizing feelings ("That made me sad.")</li> <li>• Expressing feelings indirectly through a story ("Johnny [a classmate] was walking in the forest and then I took out my sword and my other weapons. I fought him and killed him.")</li> <li>• Claiming entitlement ("I had it first.")</li> <li>• Appealing to rules: home rules, school rules or social rules in play ("We can't agree, then mommy and daddy get it.")</li> </ul> |
|---|

### Assertion strategies.

Horowitz, Boardman and Redlener (1994) define an assertion as "a unilateral attempt to get what one wants" (p. 86). I have adopted the same definition here but conceptualize "what one wants" more broadly. "What one wants" includes not only tangible objects, but also intangible matters such as peer acceptance or inclusion in a game, keeping a group game going, getting even with a peer who had just denounced one's friendship, and so on.

The strategies that children used to get what they wanted were quite varied. They used strategies as simple as saying "no" or "stop it" without any justification (quite frequently) to composing an imaginary story that eliminated one's dispute partner as in the example below (observed only once).

- Terry (4:6), Johnny (4:11) and I were in a small hideaway nook, telling stories. Terry told the first story. It was a ghost story about himself saving Johnny's life. Then it was Johnny's turn. He told a variation of Terry's story, except this time it was Johnny who saved Terry's life. "Now, it's your turn, Ms. Lokon," Johnny said when he finished with his story. Terry interjected, "No, it's my turn and then her turn." Johnny wrinkled his brows at this unfair rotation of turns and said, "No more stories about me!" Terry ignored Johnny's exclamation and told this story: "Johnny was walking in the dark, dark forest. I saw him. I took out my sword and my other weapons and fought him and killed him" (Fieldnotes, 2-21-95).

I have included the above story to illustrate the range of variety in strategies that children used to get "what one wants." Other strategies in this category are verbalizing desire ("I want it"), verbalizing protest (with no justification: "Stop it"; with justification: "You pushed me, you're bad"), verbalizing feelings ("That made me sad"), claiming entitlement ("I had it first"), and appealing to rules, either adult-determined rules or made up rules during play ("I said, 'time', you can't catch me when I said 'time'").

Table 2  
Conciliation Attempts

- |  |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Submitting/yielding ("Here, you can have it.")</li> <li>• Apologizing ("I'm sorry.")</li> <li>• Clarifying motive for action ("It was an accident.")</li> <li>• Siding with the aggressor ("I'm on your team.")</li> <li>• Offering compensation ("I like to give her some money sometime.")</li> <li>• Creating compromises or alternate solutions ("How about if some of the kids play outside and some of the kids stay inside?")</li> </ul> |
|--|

### Conciliation attempts.

Conciliation attempts are strategies used to cease opposition by more favorable measures than assertion strategies. Others have called this category "negotiation" (Horowitz et al., 1994). I have expanded their notion of negotiation to include strategies that attempt to achieve conciliation without necessarily negotiating the issue. Offering compensation and creating compromises or alternatives are indeed negotiation strategies that are also aimed at reaching some sort of conciliation. However, it would be inaccurate to call the following strategies



negotiation: simply apologizing, submitting or yielding to one's dispute partner ("Here, you can have it"), clarifying one's motive for action ("It was an accident"), and siding with the aggressor ("I'm on your team"). Therefore, I have labeled this category of strategies as "conciliation attempts" rather than "negotiation." The example below demonstrates that while negotiation is too narrow a term for this category of strategies, conciliation attempts is more appropriate.

- Randy (4:11) was about to cry when his repeated pleas to play something other than Power Rangers were ignored by the other four children. He kept saying, "Come on, you guys, I don't want to play Power Rangers, I want to play something else." By his fourth plea, he began to have tears in his eyes. Right at this moment, Marcus (4:11) who had been busy playing Power Rangers and ignoring Randy's pleas, stopped and said, "Okay, Randy, okay, what do you want to play? I'll play with you, okay? I'll play whatever you want to play, okay? What do you want to play?" Marcus' voice sounded gentle and nurturing. He lightly rubbed and tapped Randy's shoulders while consoling him. (Fieldnotes, 2/6/1995).

In the above example, neither Randy, nor Marcus was engaged in a negotiation. Randy simply asserted his desire to play a different game and after a while, Marcus responded by submitting to Randy's wishes. Another conciliatory attempt that I do not feel falls neatly into the negotiation category is illustrated by the example below.

- Bud (3:3) was trying to find wrestling partners during the indoor playground time. He ran into people and intentionally "bumped" them with his chest as he ran into them. Several children yelled, "No," "Let me go," or "Stop it." When Bud ran into Terry (4:11), Terry yelled loudly, "I'm on your team, I'm on your team!" It is important to note here that there was no team game that was going on then (Fieldnotes, 2/9/1995).

This example, among others, has led me to expand the negotiation category to conciliatory attempts because Terry was in a sense trying to "trick" Bud into letting him go, rather than negotiating with him.

Table 3  
Third party intervention

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dispute reporting followed by a solution proposed by a previously uninvolved person</li> <li>• Using adult authority ("It's time for Jane to go home, mommy. Can you walk her home?")</li> </ul> |
|---|

### Third party intervention

Third party intervention is defined as a situation in which "disputants accept a solution proposed by a previously uninvolved person" (Horowitz, et al., 1994, p. 89). Generally, the third party is an adult, but this was not always the case. It seemed to me that this definition only covers the strategy where the disputants are passive recipients of solutions offered by a third party. It does not, however, include the strategy where a child in dispute actually thinks up of a solution before soliciting

assistance from a third party as illustrated in the example below. This story was told to me by Ian's mother.

- Jane (4) likes to play with Ian (3:11). Ian likes to play with her too but sometimes he wants it to end. Sometimes he would say, "Mom, it's time for Jane to go home. Can you walk her home?" Last week, Ian and Jane had been playing here together for a couple of hours. It was four o'clock, time for Ian to watch his Power Rangers. He does this every day. Jane was not interested in Power Rangers and she was making him really nervous, prancing around. Ian told Jane, "I'm watching this and if you don't like it, you go home." On our TV we get it twice, first at four and then again at four thirty. So, Ian said to me, "Mom, I don't want Jane here when this [Power Ranger show] comes on again." I said, "Fine," and Jane agreed, so there was no problem. (Fieldnotes, 4/4/95).

In the above example, Ian came up with the solutions himself before he solicited help from his mother. It seems to me that the understanding of the third party intervention category needs to be expanded to include strategies where the child's agency is recognized.

Table 4  
Disengagement

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walking away from a dispute scene</li> <li>• Physically pushing away an aggressor</li> <li>• Verbalizing refusal to engage in a dispute ("me don't want to fight.")</li> <li>• Ignoring provocation</li> <li>• Censoring own opinion to prevent dispute ("Mommy, I think Barbies are stupid, but I won't tell her that.")</li> </ul> |
|---|

### Disengagement

In this category, children engaged in disputes change the subject or activity or one or both children refuse to continue the interaction (Horowitz, et al., 1994, p. 86). These strategies include acts such as walking away from a dispute scene, physically pushing away an aggressor, verbalizing refusal to engage in a dispute ("Me don't want to fight"), and ignoring provocations.

The only other strategy that I felt was not accommodated by this category was a preventive strategy in which a child censored her own opinion to prevent disputes from occurring. Technically, this strategy cannot be considered a disengagement strategy since there was no dispute in the first place from which the child wished to disengage. However, I do consider this as a disengagement strategy because the child recognized the potential of a dispute and chose not to engage in it. The example below was told to me by Karen and Jenny's mother.

- Karen (5:5) loves to play this Barbie game. It's very long and involved with sex-stereotyped roles, and I just don't like that. And I think Jenny (4:5) knows this. She said to me one day, "You know, Mommy, Karen really really likes Barbie dolls, doesn't she?" "Yes, she does, Jenny." And then she whispered to me, "You know Mommy, I think Barbies are stupid but I will never tell Karen that." (Fieldnotes, 4/5/1995).

Jenny chose not to engage in a dispute with her older sister, Karen, by sharing her opinions only with her mother whom she sensed as having a similar opinion on the subject matter. This preventive disengagement strategy needs to be included in this category of dispute strategies.

I have discussed above the various strategies that preschool children used in dealing with peer disputes. I have also discussed the various limitations of the categorization of such strategies as understood by researchers on early childhood conflicts. In the next section, I will discuss the implications of this study and directions for further study.

## Discussion

Observation at Kid First suggests that these preschoolers engaged in peer disputes following two types of issues: (1) a conflict of interests over property, territory, turn-taking, winner status in games, and attention or friendship status and (2) unwanted physical contact, whether it is hitting or hugging.

Control of the outcome of the disputed event seemed to be the key factor in situations in which there was conflict of interest. In incidents involving unwanted physical contact, it seemed that the contact was made either by accident in rough-housing situations or made deliberately as a way of initiating social contact.

The notion that peer disputes could be a form of initiating social contact is consistent with the findings of Caplan, Vespo, Pederson, and Hay (1991) who observed peer disputes over toys among one and two-year olds. They found that children's conflicts may be socially, not just instrumentally, motivated. Two-thirds of the conflicts in their study occurred when duplicate toys were available to the child that initiated the conflict. Hay and Ross (1982) found that in disputes over toys, the "winners" often abandoned the toy just won. I saw this happen at Kid First, as well. This implies, then, that some disputes are socially motivated and that parents or teachers may be doing their children a disservice if they indiscriminately intervene in such disputes.

The children at Kid First used a wide range of strategies in dealing with disputes. These strategies may be grouped into four distinct categories: assertion, conciliatory attempts, third party intervention and disengagement. Although these categories have been used in the literature to discuss conflict strategies of both young children and adolescents (Collins and Laursen, 1992; Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, and Eastenson, 1988; Horowitz, Boardman, and Redlener, 1994), I felt that they used the categories uncritically. They began their studies assuming that these categories as defined were going to be represented in their data. This was indeed the case. However, I found that since I began my observations without these categories in mind, I was able to expand or redefine these categories in order to accommodate strategies that I observed at Kid First.

The assertion category needs to include strategies in which the object of the assertion includes not only tangible objects, but also intangible matters such as peer acceptance, keeping a group game going, getting even with a peer who had just denounced one's friendship, and so on. It also needs to accommodate a wide range of strategies from simple assertions ("no!") to imaginative narrations that may not seem like an assertion.

I have proposed to expand the category of "negotiation" strategies (Horowitz, et al., 1994) to "conciliation attempts" to include strategies that attempt at achieving conciliation without necessarily negotiating the disputed issue. These strategies include apologizing, submitting or yielding to one's dispute partner ("here, you can have it"), clarifying one's motive for action ("it was an accident"), or siding with the aggressor ("I'm in your team").

Third party intervention strategies have generally been understood as strategies in which the disputants are passive recipients of resolutions offered by a third party, usually an adult (Horowitz, et al., 1994). This definition needed to be expanded to include a strategy observed at Kid First in which a child in a dispute actually thinks up a solution before soliciting assistance from an adult. He simply used the adult's authority to execute a resolution that he had thought up all by himself. In other words, the definition of this category needs to be expanded to include strategies in which the child's agency is recognized.

Disengagement strategies need to be expanded to include not only strategies in which a child physically or emotionally withdraws from a dispute, but also preventive strategies in which the child recognizes the potential of a dispute and monitors her own behavior so as not to engage in one.

In sum, I have argued here that one of the traditional frameworks which has been used to look at disputes among young children is too limited. Young children's creative, imaginative, and anticipatory capabilities in dealing with disputes have been underestimated. To remedy this situation, more open-ended observations are necessary. This study is one such attempt. More open-ended observation leads to expanded understanding of categories of dispute analysis. This is one way of sensitizing early childhood conflict researchers and teachers to the richness and variation of young children's conduct.

One area that I did not include in this study is the strategies that adults used when intervening in peer disputes. It would be interesting to compare their strategies with those of the children. Based on my observation of the wide-ranging strategies used by the children at Kid First, I am inclined to think that adults may be more limited in their creativity when thinking up intervention strategies. A comparative inquiry may lead to ideas and suggestions that adults may learn from preschool children.

A future study that looks into the relationship between issues, strategies and outcomes of disputes combined with effectiveness assessment studies may lead to information that is useful for parents and teachers. Increased awareness of effective strategies within certain contexts may contribute to better parenting and classroom management.

One last thing that I would like to include here is my conviction that conflicts can benefit the children even if they are not resolved. In fact, among children this age, more conflicts remained unresolved than resolved. This is consistent with my observation at Kid First, as well as observations made by Killen and Turiel (1991), Rizzo (1992), and Ross and Conant (1992).

It is interesting to note that in the present study about two-thirds of the incidents observed in the school setting were unresolved. However, almost all of the peer dispute stories narrated by the three mothers were resolved. This difference may reflect the nature of narrative practice in that stories need to include a problem

and a resolution, or it may reflect the adults' need to resolve conflicts that is not shared by young children. More systematic inquiry in this area may better inform parents and teachers about when to intervene and propose a solution and when to leave things alone.

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**Appendix A**

**Correspondence**

*(The names below have been changed to ensure confidentiality)*

March 19, 1995

Dear Kid First parents:

It has been about two months since Mrs. Jones began working with your children at Kid First. During this period, I have been visiting the school about once or twice a week and am very happy to see that no one had any difficulties making the transition. In fact, I am the only one that is currently still working on transitioning.

The break from Kid First has been great for my study. I spend most of my days reading and working on projects. Right now, I am working on a small project on kid-to-kid relationships. I want to learn from parents about how their kids get along with other kids both at home and at school. To do this project I need to talk with several parents for about thirty minutes to an hour. I would appreciate it if you would volunteer your time to help me with this project. I can meet almost at any time (including the mornings when you drop off your child at the preschool) and anonymity of the school and the individuals is of course guaranteed. Please sign up on the chart by the check-in table if you can help out. Thank you very much.

At the conclusion of the project, I am more than happy to share the findings with whomever interested.

Thanks,

Elizabeth Like Lokon  
Miami University  
Oxford, Ohio 45056

Letter circulated with permission from Mrs. Jones, teacher, and Sandra Michaels, president.

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**Appendix B****Interview Question****Purpose of Study**

To learn about how preschool kids get along with other kids both at home and at school. I hope to learn the different ways kids interact with one another, how they feel about other kids, how they express these feelings, and how they negotiate different situations involving other kids.

**Question**

Could you tell me stories that might help me understand how "Amy" gets along with other children?