

What is The Art to Grow Project?

From the moment children are born, they are learning a highly complex set of skills that are required for them to navigate the world. One of the sets of skills that young people acquire as they grow are those conflict and communication skills which help them resolve disputes, solve problems, and understand people who see things differently than they do. Children are influenced by layer upon layer of external influences that inform how they see the world and how they should react. Some of those influences are:

- Parents
- Older siblings
- Neighborhood
- School
- Race and culture
- Societal norms and practices
- Television, movies, popular culture

Each of those influences communicate messages to the child about how to respond to others, what to think about others, what is dangerous and what is not, what is rewarded and valued, and who does “well” and who doesn’t. Often these are competing messages and the child is confused by what he or she is being told. “Play nice” and “fight back” are not unusual conflicting messages for children to hear. To sort out when to be one way and when to be the other is very seldom clear to the child.

Susanne Terry and several of her colleagues, conflict professionals who work in schools, became interested in why some children learn conflict skills easily and some do not. These conflict educators were aware of the numbers of schools in the country that had started programs to help children resolve conflicts. Currently in the U.S. there are many of projects that have been designed to teach conflict resolution skills to children. These projects, such as the Teaching Tolerance curriculum and the Committee for Children’s Second Step program, for school age children, focus primarily on how children communicate in conflict and what tools they can use to bring about resolution.

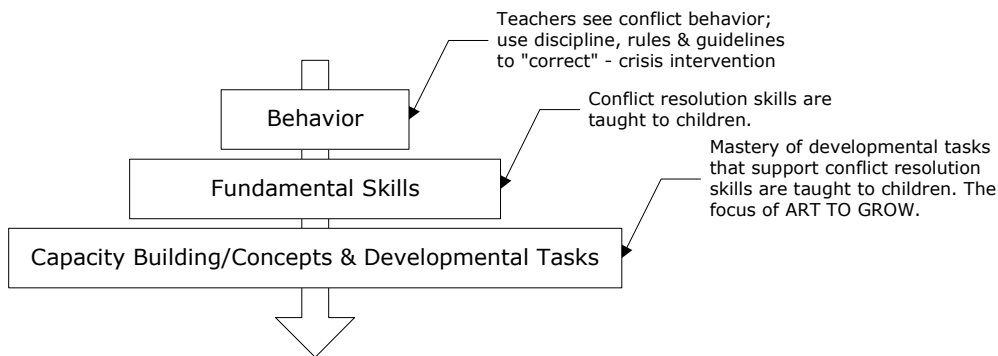
In the successful programs, children learn a variety of ways to settle differences and keep peace in their school. Other programs have struggled to have these skills become the norm in the school environment; many of the projects atrophied. Even in the successful programs, however, it was noticed that some children learn the skills well and others are in a constant struggle with the simplest conflict and communication skills.

We were intrigued by this and kept a close eye on it for a number of years. While unable to do the sort of research that would be required for a definitive answer, we began to shape a theory that might help solve the mystery. That theory was this: every child has certain developmental tasks that he or she must master as they grow to be healthy and accomplished adults. Some children do well with those tasks and others are interrupted before the task can be completed. Interference with a child’s development can come in any of the areas listed above or from other traumatic specific

sources (violence, parent's death, alcohol, war). When children haven't been able to accomplish some of the fundamental tasks of growing, it is difficult to teach them the more sophisticated skills of societal interaction. Just as a child needs to understand numbers before doing algebra, so must the child be able to master basic developmental skills before learning to successfully engage in conflict.

Elementary and high school educators, as well as educational researchers are pointing out some significant gaps in the mastery of the fundamental cognitive building blocks that support success in conflict resolution skills. If young people do not have some of these building blocks such as logical sequencing (the ability to see the logical progression of events), imagining alternative realities and recognizing and identifying emotional content, they will have difficulty being effective in conflict and communication.

The diagram below illustrates three approaches to conflict resolution with young children.



The Behavior approach focuses on crisis intervention and traditional discipline methods. The Fundamental Skills approach teaches children to use various methods to de-fuse and resolve conflict situations. The Capacity Building approach, the focus of this project, provides methods and strategies to help children master the underlying critical developmental tasks and cognitive skills that can enhance conflict resolution skills in young children.

Susanne Terry and Bonnie Dasher-Andersen, whose early training was in child development, spoke with a number of conflict professionals to ask them to identify traits of a fifth grade child who is successful in conflict. Then we examined the developmental tasks of children who are 4, 5, & 6 years old. We then asked ourselves, "What would the child have to do to get from the skill level of 4, 5 & 6 year olds to having the traits of a child successful in conflict at a fifth grade level?"

Based on an examination of this question, and in dialogue with specialists in child development, we chose nine areas that would require careful attention for a pre-Kindergarten or Kindergarten-aged child to have a good start in being successful in conflict.

We then looked to the arts to help us find a way for children to jump start their success track. Because the arts are used so frequently in the classroom through music, storytelling, and pictures, it seemed sound to continue this method of helping children focus on particular developmental tasks. The arts have been used with young children to help them tell stories and communicate their perspective and reflections of their world. Arts learning is frequently used to help children become more expressive

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as they reflect and process their experiences. In this project, age-appropriate arts activities will be used as an integral part of the educational process to help young children master these critical developmental tasks and cognitive skills.

As the various activities began to emerge, we paid careful attention to the work currently taking place in the classroom. In our model classroom, the teacher, Edie Goff, was already working with the children with a remarkable variety of activities that addressed some of the very developmental tasks that we were looking at. We didn't want to replicate what was already being done, but support it.

Staff members in the Child Care Support Services program of Umbrella, Inc. in St. Johnsbury, based on site visits, report a high need for home providers and other early childhood professionals to have training on both the developmental concepts and arts strategies that can be used to strengthen conflict resolution skills in young children. Currently, the only training available in the Northeast Kingdom focuses on resolving existing conflicts rather than understanding underlying developmental tasks and skills. The agency has committed to scheduling a workshop for providers in Spring 2005 focused on the methods and strategies developed during the planning grant.

This project is called Art to Grow, and is a collaboration between conflict resolution professionals, early childhood professionals, teachers, high school students, and an artist to develop materials that can be used with preschool children. Our planning grant from the Vermont Arts Council and matching funds made it possible to start our investigation and create the start of a more complete resource kit. We want to hear from you – your ideas; your successes and experiences; and also what didn't work. Please feel free to contact us as you incorporate these materials into your classroom. We can be reached at: 572 Libby Rd., St. Johnsbury, VT 05819 or via email at bonnied@sover.net.

The Art to Grow Project met during the 2004-2005 school year, and the participants brought a wide range of skills and experiences to the group. From the outset, Edie Goff, Early Childhood teacher at the St. Johnsbury School, was a part of the project and kept us grounded in the realities of the classroom. Julie Sturm lent her skills in working with young children in her role as Early Childhood Specialist. Human Services students at St. Johnsbury Academy participated in our meetings and helped us test materials. Lore Caldwell, a creative arts therapist, helped us to create the resources detailed later in the Resource Kit. Susanne Terry expertly facilitated our discussions and we all benefited from her extensive mediation and conflict resolution experience. Bonnie Dasher-Andersen acted as project coordinator and writer.

The steps in the project were:

- Examination of the necessary developmental tasks (such as empathy, anger management, and identifying emotional content) required for children to be successful at complex human interactions as they grow older.
- Development and identification of ways that the arts might assist children in mastery of those developmental tasks so that they are prepared to learn and use the necessary conflict resolution skills.
- Working with Edie Goff's classroom to pilot test our materials. The students in the Human Services program also helped test our materials and gave us valuable feedback.

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- Produced a draft resource kit containing materials used in our test classroom and other resources.

The Art to Grow Project materials support the following Vermont Early Learning Standards (VELS) Social and Emotional Development domain goals:

- *Self-Control*
 - Progress in expressing feelings, needs, and opinions;
 - Begin to cope with frustration and disappointments.
- *Interactions with Others*
 - Demonstrate empathy and caring for others;
 - Participate in resolving conflicts and disagreements with others.