



Kinship Care and Conflict Resolution

In any family, people can argue or disagree with each other at some time during their lives.

However, if disagreements with children and young people are not dealt with carefully and consistently, they can have more serious outcomes.

In kinship families, the way in which the child you care for came to live with you may have an impact on the way they view their life, and this can impact on how they behave. Sometimes these difficulties arise right away, sometimes they take some time to surface, but kinship families often struggle when conflicts arise. There can be a number of reasons for this and family loyalties and fear that the child may be removed can lead many kinship carers to be unsure of what to do and who to turn to for support.

Children and young people who live with kinship carers often face unique challenges which children who live with their parents or in foster care do not face. They may have endured traumatic experiences with their birth parents and may be distressed due to the changes in their lives, and while it is positive that they live with family members, they can experience confusion and divided loyalties.

Guidance for kinship carers from NHS Scotland suggests that children and young people in kinship care may face attachment difficulties (see the guidance sheet Kinship Care and Attachment). They may lack confidence, struggle to manage and express their emotions, experience stress, experience uncontrolled anger and shame, and have difficulty understanding how others feel. The child may find it difficult to deal with the relationships they now have including with you as the Kinship Carer, and may struggle with trust.

This guidance sheet will give some insight into managing family conflict when it arises.

The science behind dealing with conflict

The science of how we react to conflict tells us that during a child's early development, the more often they have a particular response to a particular situation, the more likely that the response will become the normal. For example if the child you care for has been left alone in the past, and felt afraid, they are more likely to feel fear or worry when you leave them, even if it's only for a minute, or if they are going to be well cared for in your absence. The reaction they might then have – which is sometimes perceived to be “bad behaviour” – may be their way of expressing that fear. This is sometimes called the ‘fight, flight or freeze’* response – where they feel that they must be alert to danger most of the time – to manage the things which worry or frighten them, and it can be difficult to manage – both for the child and for those caring for them. The more often that the behaviour is managed positively and consistently, then the more likely it is that it will cease to be the first choice of response. With support we can all change the way we respond to conflict.

“The fight, flight or freeze response (also called hyperarousal or the acute stress response) is a physiological reaction – one which has an effect on the body as well as the emotions and occurs in response to perceived danger.”

“Children and young people experiencing distress often worry that you’ll stop loving them if they are angry and upset, and if they have trouble managing their anger, the loss of your love is a very real fear to them.”

Managing Family Conflict

There are ways that conflict can be managed which may result in fewer arguments at home and when arguments do occur both you and the child you care for will be better placed to help a disagreement have a more positive outcome. The key to an effective outcome is to remain calm. Children and young people who are distressed will struggle to do this and it is the role of the adult to take the lead, be balanced and create safety for the child to express themselves. This is much more easily said than done, however. So, what can you do if things start to get a bit heated? Whether you are a young person or a carer, how can you help to calm things down?

1. Listen to what the other person is saying and give a safe space for everyone to have their say— resist the temptation to interrupt and give advice.
2. It’s important to avoid blame, as that can escalate a conflict even further. Instead of saying “you made me feel hurt” replace with “I felt hurt”, this reflects away from blaming a child and shows them how to focus on their own feelings instead of blaming someone else for them.
3. Apologise for the part that you played in the conflict – it’s rarely just one person that causes an argument.
4. Try to keep your voice and your body language calm and non-confrontational e.g. remaining seated during the discussion.
5. Ask the other person for suggestions that might lead to a solution.

6. Try to consider options where everyone wins and show that you are willing to move on. Children and young people experiencing distress often worry that you’ll stop loving them if they are angry and upset, and if they have trouble managing their anger, the loss of your love is a very real fear to them. Looking to a future together moves the focus from blaming each other on to creating solutions you can agree on. You might agree to sit down and agree a plan for dealing with conflict when situations may arise using the following headings, so that when disagreements arise, the plan is the basis of your solution, rather than an argument:
 - **What do you need?** Encourage an explanation about what both of you need and why rather than what the problem is.
 - **See it from both sides.** Try and see the situation from the other person’s viewpoint.
 - **Be honest.** Ask questions and explain how you feel. As Kinship carers you have a responsibility for the children or the young people in your care. It’s normal and healthy for young people to want to test their boundaries and you can help them to do this in an informed way that won’t harm their wellbeing.
 - **Be careful of the language you use.** It may be difficult, but it may help to change the language we use when describing the behaviour of children in conflict from challenging or bad to distressed.
 - **Consider alternatives.** When possible offer a choice of solutions, or a different way of looking at the issue. Compromise is not giving in, so long as everyone is willing to compromise and agreement is reached.



These tips may seem to be common sense but used correctly they will make a difference. In the heat of the moment they can be challenging to carry out but are worth the effort.

For further advice on managing conflict contact the Scottish Centre for Conflict Resolution on scottishconflictresolution.org.uk/

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RESOURCES

Scottish Centre for
Conflict Resolution:

scottishconflictresolution.org.uk

