

Activity: Nature Goal: Sensory Populations: Children

TH Activity Plan – Conflict Resolution Sensory Path

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Photo by K. Grimes

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ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants practice a 4-step conflict resolution strategy that follows an animal-inspired pathway along a sensory garden trail.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Apply cognitive/conscious strategies to approach conflict resolution

Physical: Develop skills in hopping, standing & stooping, while maintaining balance

Psychological/Emotional: Maintain emotional regulation when in conflict with another person

Sensory: Use auditory, tactile, & olfactory sensory inputs to aid self-regulation & cue the conflict resolution process

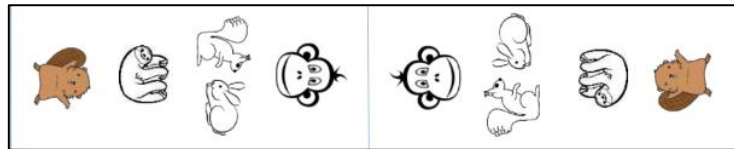
Social: Rebuild relationships after conflict

Materials

10 Steppingstones
Paint – or a banner printed with the animal mascots and/or poem (optional)
Tree branch slices or wood
Sensory plants (e.g.: rosemary or lavender, lamb’s ear, dianthus, liriopse)

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

Pre-Session Preparation: This session takes place on a pre-designed sensory garden pathway. To create the pathway, arrange 10 steppingstones in a linear pattern, following the diagram below and add corresponding sensory plants/items. Each steppingstone corresponds to an animal mascot, which can be painted on the stone, or a banner may be printed on canvas and hung nearby.



The corresponding plants and sensory items are as follows: Near the beaver stones, set pieces of wood or tree branch slices in the soil. Near the sloth stones use aromatic herbs like rosemary or lavender. Near the squirrel and rabbit stones, plant lamb’s ear or another fuzzy plant. Near the monkey stones, use attractive, sturdy low-growing flowers, like dianthus. Fill in spaces with sensory plants of your choosing, like additional rosemary or liriopse/mondo grass.

Each steppingstone represents an animal “mascot” in the conflict resolution path, and the sensory plants are reminders of the skill to practice, reinforced by the cadence of the following skill-building poem:

“We agree to make peace/ Take a deep breath and release/We talk and listen today/so we can be friends and play.”

The facilitator begins by inviting the participants to gather near the sensory pathway. Ask participants about times they have solved a problem with a peer by talking and listening and point out the need for both participants to be ready and willing. Have a participant or another adult facilitator join in modeling how to use the pathway, using the following explanations to describe how the animal pictures and corresponding sensory plants can be reminders of the steps to resolve conflict with friends and family.

- a) When 2 people decide they are ready to make peace, they stand on the opposite ends of the steppingstone pathway, stones 1 and 10, the “eager beavers” and say, “We agree to make peace”. The tree branch slices or other wood in the pathway are a tactile reminder of the eager beaver, and they may choose to touch the wood.
- b) Next, each participant hops to the next stones, represented by the sloths, and say “Take a deep breath and release.” The aromatic herb, like rosemary or lavender, reminds them to take a deep breath, and they may choose to rub a hand on the herb and smell it.
- c) Participants then hop with feet apart onto the side-by-side stones, the squirrel and the rabbit, and say “We talk and we listen today.” The fuzzy lamb’s ear plant is a soft reminder of the squirrel’s and rabbit’s ears. Here each person gets a chance to speak and listen. Here, one person might say, “I don’t like it when you knock down my blocks. Please build your own tower to knock down.” The other may ask, “But I like it when we play together. Would you like to help build a tower we can knock down together?”
- d) When an agreement is made, each person hops to the monkey stepping stone. Here they say, “So we can be friends and play.” The participants could decide to hug, shake hands, or go do an activity together. The colorful flowers are a reminder of the beauty and joy of playing with a friend again after solving a problem.
- e) Invite pairs of participants to practice the conflict resolution pathway with pretend conflicts, prompt the poem and sensory plant reminders, and reinforce the participants by noticing when they listen to one another and talk out their problems.
- f) Verbalize to participants that they can use this process even if they don’t have the steppingstones in front of them. By practicing the pathway frequently when there is not a conflict, they will create a pathway in their brain that they can use anywhere.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: The conflict resolution pathway as written is targeted toward young children and could be adapted for adults with intellectual and developmental delays, functioning on a child’s level. For typically functioning adults, omit the animals and poem, focusing more on the conflict resolution process and using simple, descriptive terms for each step. This process aids self-regulation by teaching and providing opportunity for practicing specific strategies or techniques to use when emotions run high during conflicts. These techniques include preparing mentally to agree to solve the conflict, taking a deep breath to relax and center oneself, talking things out, and celebrating the reunion.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. For participants who are at risk for falling, or using mobility aids, the pathway will need to be designed with a smoother surface. Some participants may be allergic to rosemary or lavender. Other plants may be substituted, with a preference for aromatics.

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Integrating techniques that promote empathy between the participant and animals is an effective way to increase empathy with other people, a powerful predictor of pro-social behaviors and emotional regulation.

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

- Bailey, B. (n.d.). Playground: Conflict resolution time machine. *ConsciousDiscipline.com*
- Selly, P., (2014). *Connecting animals and children in early childhood*. Redleaf Press.
- Fleming, L., Bethel, M., & Roberts, T. (2023). Self-regulation, its neuroscience foundations and horticultural therapy: Growing the connections. *Journal of Therapeutic Horticulture*, 33(1).

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2024.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2024.