

Resolving Conflict as Part of Safety Management

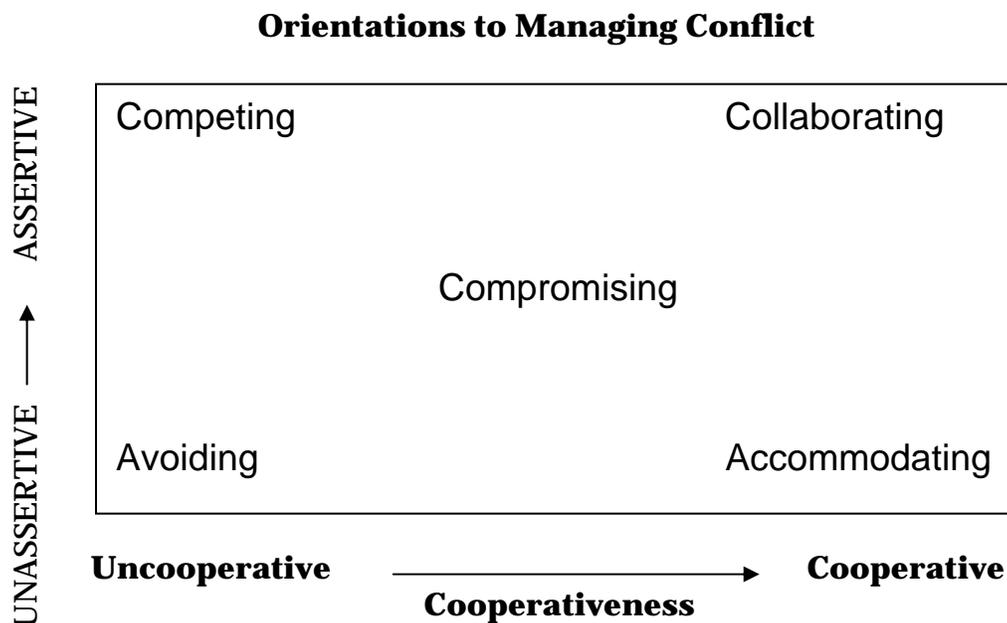
Introduction

A foster parent doesn't want to go along with the visitation plan. A community service provider feels so strongly that a parent cannot participate with in-home safety providers that she is challenging whether a different option for safety management is necessary. A mom is having personality conflicts with a family preservation worker who is coming into the home several times a week.

Conflict is a common influence of difficulty and breakdown in safety plans. You can expect that a fair amount of safety management required of you as an ongoing CPS worker will be concerned with conflict resolution.

A Conflict Resolution Model for Safety Management

People who participate within safety plans are predisposed to handling conflict in certain ways. Understanding different methods for resolving conflict can help you in managing ongoing safety plans. Blake and Mounton (1964) identified five orientations to handling conflict. These are represented in the following diagram.



The orientations to resolving conflict depend on two axes of interest: (1) the person's desire to satisfy his/her own concerns as expressed by assertiveness and (2) the person's desire to satisfy the other party's concerns expressed by cooperativeness. Caregivers, family members and others participating in safety plans (lay and professional) will use one of five ways for resolving the conflict they are experiencing related to their involvement in the safety plan.

Avoiding – These methods are characterized by both uncooperative and unassertive behavior. They do not address the issue within the safety plan that is problematic and are indifferent to the other's needs and concerns. Such people may avoid CPS contact. They are in many ways more difficult to deal with than those associated with a safety plan who are openly hostile. You must be on guard, for avoidance can cause things to go underground including an erosion of the safety plan.

Accommodating – Those within safety plans who are accommodators play down differences. Surface harmony exists. They are characterized by cooperative and unassertive behavior. They place the other party's needs and concerns above their own. Consider caregivers or providers who superficially cooperate but fail to participate within the safety plan according to what has been agreed. Accommodators usually are not comfortable with being assertive about their own ideas or positions regarding the safety plan and how it is working. They will "go along" with positions taken by others or by you but will not do so on the basis of a belief that the positions are right or agreeable.

Competing – Some participants within safety plans desire to meet their own needs and concerns at the expense of the others participating within the safety plan. The most assertive and least cooperative people use this style. Caregivers or those providing safety services or activities that will argue about anything and are least likely to cooperate with the agency are likely to be using this method. You may find that

professional providers have an interest in being competitive with you regarding what the safety issues are or whether the safety plan is the correct one. This can become a “whose dog is biggest” kind of dilemma.

Compromising and Negotiating – Persons who use this approach possess moderate amounts of cooperativeness and assertiveness to resolve problems. The outcome is partial fulfillment of the needs, concerns, and goals of all who are involved in the safety plan. Compromising and negotiating often is a more acceptable method for you to use when beginning the safety management relationship with caregivers and safety plan participants. As relationships begin to form between all parties, you may be effective in varying conflict resolution methods.

Collaborating – This involves the maximum use of both cooperation and assertion. It requires more commitment than the other styles and takes more time and energy. This style is the most desirable method to use among the relationships existing within a safety plan. The challenge for you in this approach obviously has to do with your authority and how much latitude can be given through collaboration concerning management of the safety plan.

Applying These Ideas

A person's predisposition to conflict can greatly influence a choice of response when faced with a conflict situation. A person with a high concern for relationships with others participating in the safety plan and a low concern for whether the safety plan works will see conflict as only serving to drive people apart. Such a person is more likely to adopt an *accommodating* approach to conflict resolution. In contrast, the person with a high concern for a safety plan working and a low concern for those involved in the safety plan is more likely to adopt a *competing* style. People who see conflict as reflecting basic irresolvable

differences in the safety plan which must be accepted (low concern for relationship and low concern for personal goals) will tend to *avoid* conflict. Persons with a moderate and balanced concern for relationships within the safety plan and expectations for the safety plan will tend to resort to *compromise*. Finally, persons with a high concern for the participants within the safety plan and a high concern for the effectiveness and smooth operation of the safety plan will use *collaboration* more frequently.

Interpersonal conflict when managing safety plans is hard to handle because it often has at its core self-interest, a sense of powerlessness and self-protection which produces a great deal of anger. Consequently, the first step for handling conflict is to defuse the anger. The emotional aspects of the conflict must be dealt with before substantive safety plan issues can be addressed. Another important point is that most conflict is around methods or process or problem solving rather than regarding the basic value of the safety plan. For example, most participants want the safety plan to work and for it to be the least intrusive means appropriate. When safety management results in consensus among safety plan participants regarding the basic value of the safety plan first, it is more likely that consensus regarding how to resolve safety plan disruptions can be achieved.

Following are the basic steps for managing safety plans when conflict arises:

Provide an opportunity to deal with the emotions first. Use feeling techniques such as ventilation and verbalization of feelings to enable the safety plan participants to release emotions. Remember professionals, foster parents and others will harbor serious feelings about their involvement; the involvement of others; the value of the plan; and the effectiveness of the plan. The emotion issue is not always about how caregivers feel.

Treat the person(s) with respect. If disagreements among safety plan participants become heated, remain calm and convey understanding

rather than assuming a defensive or authoritarian posture. Joining in the hysteria "fuels the fire."

Listen until you "experience the other side." We tend not to understand the content of another person's ideas until we can stand in his or her shoes. We should listen and use techniques such as reflection, verbal following, attending behaviors, lowering authority, and empathy to develop the connection that will be necessary to resolve the conflict.

State your point of view. After you have demonstrated that you respect the person(s) and can understand his or her feelings and point of view, you then communicate your points. Argument-provoking replies should be avoided. Also avoid value statements and concentrate on tangible outcomes. Techniques such as reframing can help to alter a person's perspective regarding a specific issue.

Decide on the best possible solution. If possible, you are trying to find a "win, win" solution. Try to select a solution or combination of solutions that will meet both parties' needs. To eventually achieve this end, it may be necessary to try techniques such as joining resistance, confrontation, focusing, and logical discussion.

As often as not, conflict within safety plans and among participants is influenced by confusion, wrong expectations and communication problems that occur from the onset of the implementation of the safety plan. Central to getting off on the wrong foot is not assuring that everyone understands (a) the need for the safety plan, (b) the specific individual requirements, and (c) the role each is expected to play. Important to that is a clear understanding and acceptance of the role of CPS as overseer of the safety plan. Much of what occurs in effectively creating a safety plan reduces conflict as implementation of the plan continues over time.

Closing

Patience and tolerance are critical in the management of safety plans. It is crucial to keep a perspective about what is at stake, what is given up, what is taken away from caregivers. It is important to constantly be cognizant of the inconvenience some participants must go to in order to participate in a safety plan, and presumably they do so out of concern and caring. It is wise to remember that professionals and others from the community who participate in safety plans may have varying philosophies, beliefs, values and personal expectations about how to keep children safe; what constitutes effective safety intervention; and how best they can serve a family. So, from the onset, safety plans bring together all sorts of competing interests and points of view that must be understood and sensitively managed.