

FINDING

YOUR WAY THROUGH

CONFLICT



Strategies for Early Childhood Educators

Chris Amirault, Ph.D., and Christine M. Snyder, M.A.

Foreword by Ann McClain Terrell

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PRAISE FOR
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CONFLICT



“Amirault and Snyder offer a unique perspective not on resolving conflicts among children, of which much has been written, but on those between the adults who work with them. Drawing on research and experience, they confront an uncomfortable topic with honesty and compassion, combined with practical solutions and encouragement. The authors convincingly argue that you must get into the ‘mess’ in order to find your way out of it. Then, step-by-step, using a wide range of scenarios, they guide readers through the tangled weeds and sticky swamps toward a clearing of the air. *Finding Your Way Through Conflict* is a timely and valuable manual in an era when conflict, often unrecognized, let alone openly acknowledged, divides us personally and politically, as well as professionally. The book offers readers the work and life skills we all need now. Once learned, and continually relearned, we can pass them on to the next generation.”

—Ann S. Epstein, Ph.D., author of *The Intentional Teacher*



“A thank you is in order for Chris and Christine as they offer this vulnerable, insightful, and thought-provoking inquiry into understanding conflict. With decades of early learning expertise and through layering personal encounters that are inherent in the work of serving others, the authors share their own conflicts as well as the toolkit they’ve developed to assist the reader in handling a range of situations. Far from a one-size-fits-all presentation of magic solutions, this book offers strategies and research that will guide the reader in developing skills for reflection, learning, and improvement. In the words of Chris and Christine, ‘If you do not learn these skills, *conflict will erase and silence the very people you seek to serve.*’ If you work to serve children and families, you’ll want to read this book.”

—Vincent J. Costanza, Ed.D., advisor, Bright Start Foundation Advisory Council

“This book is for anyone who wants to feel more confident and capable in handling those keep-you-up-at-night disagreements and simmering resentments. Amirault and Snyder explain the skills, tactics, and mindset you need to turn inevitable conflicts into opportunities for collaboration and growth. Brimming with practical advice and useful insights, this book will not only change how you approach relationships with coworkers, parents, and children, it’ll transform how you approach your life.”

—Amy Gallo, contributing editor at *Harvard Business Review*
and author of the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*



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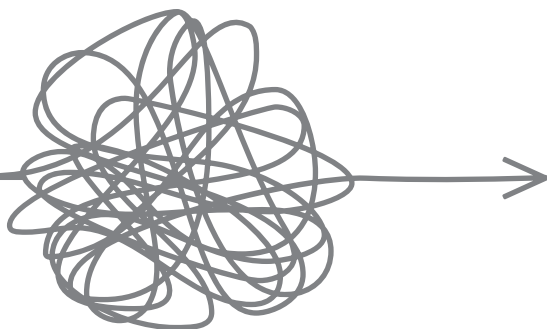
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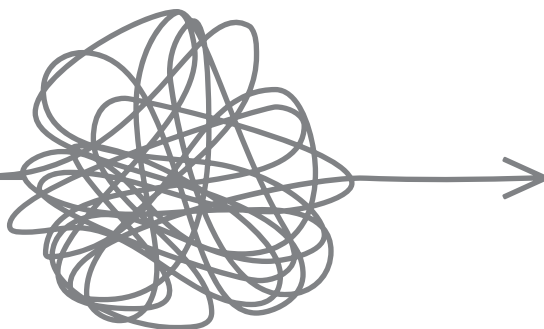


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Foreword

by Ann McClain Terrell



“Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish regardless of race, color, creed, religion, gender, class, caste, or any other social markers of difference.”

Nelson Mandela

In *Finding Your Way Through Conflict*, Chris Amirault and Christine Snyder provide those of us in the early childhood education field with guidance and opportunities for reflection and growth in our ability to solve conflicts in the workplace, and, just as importantly, within our own family and community. As the authors point out, we are human and, as such, bring our “stuff” with us into our centers, programs, and classrooms. Our personal and cultural perceptions and assumptions create the lens through which we view conflicts that arise and need to be addressed. Relationships are key to early childhood education, and we must intentionally work to build and sustain meaningful and respectful relationships with each other, our colleagues and coworkers, and the children and families we serve. This deep dive into conflict resolution gives us new knowledge and skills to help us address this issue as we work with our colleagues and serve the children and families in our centers, programs, and classrooms.

Conflict resolution and problem-solving are required of a leader. In my book, *Graceful Leadership in Early Childhood Education*, I describe some real conflict situations that I have faced in my career. One such situation happened at the beginning of my job as the director of a campus-based child care program. About a month in, I had to intervene in a child–parent interaction that occurred during end-of-the-day pickup. I overheard an adult voice coming from the coatroom area. The adult was speaking to a child in a very loud, harsh tone. I approached and observed one of our student parents trying to put a coat on her child. She was also physically hitting the child, and the little girl was crying. I was sure the whole center could hear the interaction, including other parents who were picking up children.

I walked up to the parent and very intently and quietly said to her, “I’m sorry, but I cannot allow you to do that here.” The parent looked at me and said in a combative manner something like, “Oh, so you’re going to tell me how to raise my child.” By now we were being observed by staff members, and I realized that this was an opportunity to model my approach to conflict resolution, as I needed to assess the situation quickly and deliver a response that

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would address it and meet the parent's and child's needs at the same time. So I responded again by intently and quietly saying to the parent, "My name is Ann Terrell and I am the new director here, and what I'm saying to you is, from one Black woman to another, that if you continue to hit your child, I will have to report you for child abuse." The parent stopped her behavior, looked at me, and said, "No one has ever told me that before." I then stooped down to the child's eye level and, while I helped her put on her coat, said to her that her mother had had a very long day and was probably tired and really needed her cooperation in getting dressed to go home. I walked them to the door, hugged them both, and said I'd see them in the morning. I ended the interaction by saying to the parent that I would be available for her if she ever needed or wanted to talk.

Sometimes conflict resolution can be frustrating when it seems that you're the only one trying to address the perceived problem. During my tenure as director of the campus child care center, we implemented a seven-step approach to problem-solving as part of the curriculum for the children. The preschool rooms served three-, four-, and five-year-old children, and quite often had turnover as the student parents graduated and withdrew their children. There was always a learning curve in our problem-solving approach for the new enrollees. "Francis" started in our program at age two and as the child of faculty, she remained with us to kindergarten entry, so she was very familiar with our approach to problem-solving. Whether it were a conflict at the sensory table or the block area, Francis understood the seven-step approach and implemented it. But one day in the beginning of a new fall semester, a conflict in the preschool classroom arose, as indicated by raised voices. The teacher used the prompt, "We seem to have a problem, can you two tell me what the problem is?" as she approached Francis and another child. The teacher then followed up with, "Francis, there seems to be a problem, how can we solve the problem?" Francis in turn stomped her foot and proclaimed, "I don't want to solve the problem!"

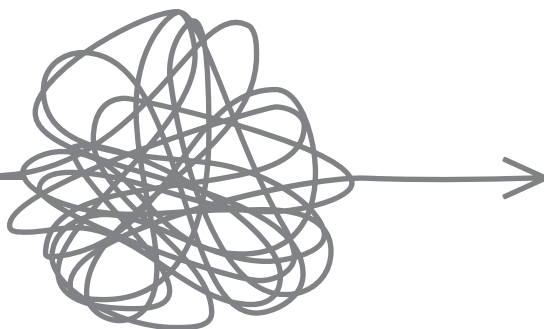
Many of us respond to conflict in this way; we want to hide from and ignore the conflict because we feel we are not adequately prepared to address the situation. Depending on the conflict, sometimes we can dive right in and resolve it. However, sometimes the conflict calls for us to sit with the issue, reflect, and then decide how best to address it. I love the title of this book, *Finding Your Way Through Conflict*. To me, it says that sometimes we must sit with the messiness and be uncomfortable in our reflection on our part in the conflict and how to resolve it.

Skilled conflict-resolution ability provides adults and children the opportunity to be competent and confident in handling these challenging situations, be they with parents, staff, peers, or between children. This book lights the path to finding your way through conflict resolution and to growth in conflict-resolution skills that will carry early childhood professionals throughout our careers.

Best,
Ann McClain Terrell

Introduction

Approaching Conflict



Dealing constructively with tough topics and awkward situations strengthens a relationship. And that’s an opportunity too good to pass up.

Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, *Difficult Conversations*

The teacher who interrupts you whenever you’re speaking in meetings and then accuses you of being rude when you point it out. The teammate who smiles while explaining why they chose not to do that unpleasant task, even though they wore that same smile yesterday when telling you that the same task was “No problem.” The supervisor who repeatedly reassures you that “You’re doing great!” whenever you are in their office but points out flaws every time they walk into your classroom. The veteran colleague who has been glaring at you whenever you pass them in the hallway since you arrived, for who-knows-what reasons.

Read the opening quote again.

These situations are “opportunities”? That are “too good to pass up”?! Yes!

If you take away one insight from this book, make it this: *to learn how to get out of conflict, you must learn how to be in conflict.* And that means turning toward the conflict, inhabiting its nuances fully, and engaging it as a learning opportunity for you, the other person, and the relationship you share. There are no sidelines or shortcuts, no easy ways out. Years of practice with thousands of people in our personal and work lives, along with the research we’ve gathered here, make it evident that most conflict is just like the famous bear hunt. You can’t go over it and you can’t go under it. You have to find your way through it.

Developing the ability to find your way through conflict requires learning about yourself, others, and behavior change, so you’re going to need a healthy dose of patience. You probably picked up this book to get right at those tricky, sticky conflicts—we understand! We share those persistent desires to fix conflicts *right now*. But we’ve learned that conflict is not quite that simple, and that applying conflict resolution listicles and short-term fixes often does more harm than good.

To learn how to get out of conflict, you must learn how to be in conflict.



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It can be frustrating to make that time and effort, especially since so many common conflicts seem deceptively simple at first glance. Why can't two colleagues working in the same classroom sort out who's doing what? Surely an instructional coach can find ways to address the problematic practices of a teacher they supervise? And if a parent isn't meeting basic program requirements, it doesn't have to be a confrontation, does it? Sadly, we've learned over and over that such "simple" conflicts are complex, nuanced situations that require careful thinking and reflection. After all, if they are so simple, why do they keep happening?

Following years of workshops with thousands of participants, we are certain that you can learn effective strategies that take into account the complexity and nuances of conflict. Indeed, throughout the book, we refer to how each of us has built up our tolerance for conflict, learning and using the skills we now have in our toolbelts and will share with you. Along with tales of success, we also share our stories of self-discovery as we confront new challenges from within new conflicts, a process that is ongoing for us both.

Making the decision to confront conflict from within it is the most challenging, important shift in perspective that effective conflict engagement requires, a shift we hope you'll enact throughout the book. But don't despair. We are confident that you—yes, you—can make that shift and learn how to be in and get out of conflict. Welcome to the bear hunt!

Conflict in Early Childhood Education

This book focuses on the world of conflicts faced in the work of early childhood education. And while we will at times refer to conflicts with children and with families, this book engages primarily with conflicts involving early childhood colleagues. Here's why.

When the two of us first met several years ago, we were both well into our careers in the early childhood profession. Christine had been devoting a great deal of time to thinking about how classrooms could best support young children's social and emotional development. Chris had been working with early childhood teachers and administrators on how best to nurture diversity and promote equity for the children and families they serve.

But when we sat down to talk about our work, our shared attention shifted to adult conflict in the field. Christine kept noticing that the adult teachers, more so than the young children, were the ones having difficulty working through and recovering from squabbles. Chris reflected that people's natural discomfort with negotiating differences could make already fraught topics of ethnicity, race, sexuality, and so on far more challenging.

As it turns out, our conversation is one of many conversations on conflict that have been occurring across the profession. Throughout the book, we show how adult conflict in early childhood education is at the center of much of the classroom quality research and metrics that are reshaping our understanding of children's learning environments and the relationships that support them. Concepts such as attunement, co-regulation, primary and secondary trauma, and teacher self-efficacy have become important perspectives that early childhood


educators can use to rethink how they engage with conflict in their work.

We have broadened our two-way conversation into a dynamic active-learning experience through presentations on conflict at national early childhood conferences, and we hope this book contributes to the growing discourse that we feel is vital to our profession. The hundreds of amazing early childhood educators we have met in our careers are people who can tackle the thorniest child developmental issues with confidence, rigor, and ease. But if you put many of those same people into a conflict with a peer, they hesitate to engage with the conflict, they avoid the work the conflict produces, and they become uncomfortable and awkward. Adult conflict can shatter the self-efficacy of some of the best early childhood teachers in a heartbeat.

Finally, though there are workplace conflicts in early childhood education settings that involve multiple people, most conflicts unfold and should be addressed within one-on-one relationships. To understand the dynamics within one-on-one conflict, this book focuses on two specific individuals: you and your counterpart. We are confident that learning about these two folks will aid you in every conflict, large or small!

The important work of supporting young children's learning and growth can also support your own learning and growth in conflict. Learning how to work through conflict starts with understanding some core principles.

Conflict is a natural part of life, a normal component of social interaction that activates our deepest humanity.



The Six Core Principles of Working Through Conflict

Over the years, we've found ourselves repeating these to ourselves and to others, as they often reveal important perspectives we're missing when conflicts arise. We return to these core principles throughout the book, illustrating their value in even the trickiest conflicts. See also page 81 for a one-page reproducible of the principles.

Conflict Is Natural, Normal, and Deeply Human

This principle, in a calm moment of reading, may appear completely obvious: conflict is a natural part of life, a normal component of social interaction that activates our deepest humanity. Of course, we don't feel that way when we are in conflict. Instead, we feel misunderstood. Everything is off kilter; our usual selves and skills have vanished, replaced by a clunky, demanding set of thoughts and feelings that do not reflect who we really are. But those feelings are precisely what connect us to the rest of humanity. Recognizing this commonality can help us have greater empathy for others—and ourselves—in the midst of conflict.

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Conflict Is the Work, Not a Distraction from the Work

Nearly everyone who has attended our workshops over the years describes conflict as the thing that prevents them from doing their real work. We believe conflict is the work. But, as far as we are aware, few if any higher education programs, early childhood agencies, and professional development systems teach adult conflict as a core component of that work. So, instead of seeing conflict as an impediment or distraction, we place it front and center as the work itself—and, we're convinced, usually the most important work.

Conflict Is Almost Always Reciprocal

Conflicts typically drive us into a defensive posture. That's how the blame game begins: as we experience the problems created in the conflict, we extend our index finger to point out that their source exists elsewhere. Unfortunately for our egos, it's rarely that simple. In our experience, the majority of conflicts are reciprocal, which means that everyone contributes their fair share—even though they're usually well-meaning individuals trying to do what's right in tricky situations. To help you see your part of conflict, there are sections of the book where we prompt you to fess up to your role in the mess. And it turns out this is a very effective conflict resolution strategy all by itself.

Conflict Exists If Someone Says It Does

Routinely, the conflicts that have been brought to our attention seem one-sided, at least to one of the parties. In those situations, while the aggrieved person is feeling troubled, offended, disrespected, or worse, the other person doesn't even see the problem. So following from the last principle, we assert that, if one person declares a given situation is a conflict, then there's a conflict. The collaborative relationships between adults that drive most early childhood workplaces simply cannot function properly if one person is ignoring another person's concerns. So, if someone calls foul, it's time for both parties to make a good-faith effort to work it out.

Conflict Is Sustained by Win/Lose, Right/Wrong Thinking

Skillfully negotiating conflict is never just yes or no, easy or hard. In fact, conflict feeds off of that sort of either/or thinking; it's the gasoline that makes the engine run—and often splashes out of the tank, where a spark can set the car on fire! So to learn how best to negotiate conflict, you'll need to learn how to live in the middle—in the ambiguous zone—and that is a real challenge for most of us. Our families, our cultures, our educations, even our neurology: they all drive us into this sort of either/or thinking, so we teach you in this book how to resist it by developing a thorough understanding of how to avoid either/or perspectives as often as possible.

Conflict Never Stops Teaching Us

Finally, we encourage you to approach the work of this book with humility and respect for the endlessly fascinating world of conflict. In our workshops, we always share a humorous anecdote about a conflict that the two of us have had recently—often with each other. We do that because we are convinced that no one ever stops being in or learning about conflict. We hope that you'll join us with a similar sense of humor and curiosity, recognizing that every conflict is a fascinating study of people, particularly ourselves, that includes new insights and nuances worth exploring. Not only will this attitude help you establish a bit of distance from which to perceive individual conflicts, but you can also develop new perspectives and skills within those conflicts as a result. The only way to solve any given conflict is to study it from within.

**No one ever stops being in
or learning about conflict.**



How This Book Is Organized


The chapters ahead are organized around the following set of components. Each chapter focuses on key concepts that are central to understanding conflict. We take time to explain those concepts in detail, and we delve into the research insights that enrich our understanding of them. We explore why they matter, demonstrating how the key concepts arise in the real world of conflict. In those sections we also provide appropriate, real-world examples, situations that we dissect using the concepts we've just presented.

Finally, each chapter describes precisely what to do and how to do it. We want you to develop agency and confidence in conflict, and that requires two things: a set of tools, concrete actions, reflective exercises, and practical steps to take within conflict, and a set of critical stances, attitudes and perspectives that are necessary to cultivate in order to use the tools effectively.

How to Use This Book

Before we dive in: if you've picked up this book because you are deep within a complex, urgent conflict, we want to add a note of support and guidance. We also want to encourage you to approach all conflicts with patience and self-awareness. This approach is especially critical when situations feel urgent; as we discuss in chapter 3, that urgency can prevent your brain from doing what you need to do to find your way through the conflict.

We are fully aware that you may want to skip ahead to check out later chapters that lay out steps for conflict engagement right now. So we've built the book to include the patience



All conflict engagement with others must start with an inventory of what you will be bringing into that conflict yourself.

emotions you do and don't bring into your conflicts. Exploring those emotions can be tricky, so we strongly recommend that you do the reflective exercises when you are on relatively solid personal and professional ground, and that you have a close friend, partner, or colleague available to support you.

The support can be strengthened with someone who is also reading this book, as together you will gain skills for finding your way through conflict. And if you're able to work with colleagues, the exercises in chapter 2 are excellent for developing conflict skills in teams. We've found that this sort of shared self-reflection is invaluable for everyone working in an early childhood setting. Whether you're reading alone or in a group, be sure to download the professional learning community (PLC) guide we wrote to accompany the book. It's a useful resource on ways to share in the learning and has additional information we think you'll enjoy. It can be downloaded at freespirit.com/PLC.

Additionally, this book focuses on both a reflective process and an in-the-moment-of-conflict process in which we reference some useful foundational content that is typically initiated in the development of a program and discussed in new-hire orientation. This foundational content includes program mission statements, job descriptions, and field standards like the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Code of Ethical Conduct, to name a few. We've provided guidance for use of these tools in relation to conflict situations in chapter 6, but if you find yourself in the beginning stages of developing this foundational content, we encourage you to utilize the activities in the PLC as well as outside resources focused on developing a new program or new teams. NAEYC, Head Start, and local and state early childhood resource entities can be useful places to start.

This is a book that we hope you'll read and reflect on, and then come back to as new conflicts arise. Whether you are reading on your own or with your team, we are so glad to have you with us on this journey into conflict. Let's get started!

and self-awareness in those steps. Chapter 5, in particular, makes it clear that all conflict engagement with others must start with an inventory of what you will be bringing into that conflict yourself.

We are sure that you truly will benefit from the seeming delay created by sorting out the

DEFINING CONFLICT



As we welcome you on your journey into and out of conflict, let's focus on what may seem like an obvious question: what, exactly, do we mean by *conflict*? Like many abstract concepts, *conflict* is a term we use while assuming that others know what we mean. Unfortunately, most of us fail to define the term, both to ourselves and to others. In the midst of a situation that's tricky enough, we're operating without clear individual or shared definitions.

As a result, defining conflict is an important part of finding the way through it. The definition helps us understand how we're approaching the situation, what we value and prioritize, and it can do the same for the person with whom we are struggling. But it's not easy.

Quite regularly, a teacher or administrator will ask us in a hushed tone of voice, "Do you have to call this a 'conflict' workshop? I mean, 'conflict' sounds . . . so harsh!" Instead of providing some reassuring insights about working through conflict, people sometimes suggest that our use of the very word *conflict* produces it.

Every time we've attempted to refine our definition of conflict over the years, we've learned more about the complex set of cultural, organizational, and personal subtleties that each person brings to the work of conflict engagement and resolution. So with humility about the task ahead, we devote this chapter to defining conflict.

As with any conflict, the devil is in the details, and throughout the book, we encourage you to pause and write down some specifics concerning one or two conflicts in which you're currently embroiled. Doing so will help you see how you decide what is and what is not a conflict, decisions that will help you flesh out your own definition.

Defining conflict is an important part of finding the way through it. The definition helps us understand how we're approaching the situation, what we value and prioritize.



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Of course, it's impossible for us to know about your specific conflicts. So, in the next section, we introduce five scenarios that typify many of the sorts of conflicts we've heard from our colleagues over the years. As we explore these situations and perspectives on what is a conflict and why, it's likely that your definition of conflict will evolve. Keep in mind that the goal of defining conflict is not for everyone to have identical definitions. Rather, the goal is for each of us to develop a better understanding of our own definition of conflict, to recognize that other people have different definitions, and to consider the deep underlying components that contribute to our reactions to conflict.

Five Conflict Scenarios

For each of the following scenarios, jot down some notes and consider three things:

- Is this a conflict? Why or why not?
- If this is a conflict, what exactly is the issue producing the conflict?
- How comfortable are you engaging in this conflict? Are you likely to dive right in or run in the other direction?

Scenario One

You are pulling into the parking lot at work, and there is a car leaving. The driver is a parent from another classroom. They roll down their window and begin berating you for a political bumper sticker on your car. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The driver berating you? Your political bumper sticker? The driver's presumption that it's okay to berate you?

Scenario Two

You're a preschool teacher. You recently put up some new child-centered artwork in your classroom. One morning, you notice that your co-teacher has removed it without asking you. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The artwork being taken down? Your co-teacher not asking you? Your lack of trust in your co-teacher's decision-making—or their lack of trust in yours?

Scenario Three

You are a toddler teacher. One of the new children in your classroom was recently adopted and enrolled in your program immediately afterward. After seeming to have adjusted well for the first two weeks, the child bursts into an inconsolable tantrum for no apparent reason. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The child's tantrum? Your inability to understand the cause of the tantrum?

Scenario Four

You are a director of family services. An employee bursts into your office and angrily confronts you. They insist that you discriminated against them in the staff meeting the night before, which is shocking to you. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The employee's angry disruption? Their allegations of discrimination? Your discriminatory actions?

Scenario Five

You are an instructional coach. One of your first-grade teachers has a student who repeatedly ignores the teacher's classroom instructions. As you observe, the child again ignores the activity the teacher is scaffolding, and you watch the teacher perform the activity for the child. *Is this a conflict?*

If this is a conflict: What exactly is the conflict here? The child's refusal to comply with the teacher? The teacher completing the task for the child? Your choice not to step in to give feedback to the teacher?

Now take a look at what you've written for all five scenarios and, if you considered the scenario to be a conflict, reflect on how comfortable you are engaging in it. Take a moment to rate each scenario in this way. Are you likely to dive right in or run in the other direction? This reflection will help you begin an exploration of what sorts of conflicts are most challenging for you. The conflicts we are worst at engaging are the ones we want to avoid the most.

Keep your notes handy as you determine your own definition of conflict.

Defining Conflict

Here are a few informal definitions of conflict we've heard in our work, some of which may resonate for you:

"When two people disagree about something important."

"An unresolved, heated argument."

"A problem between two people or groups of people who can't get along."

"A serious, long-term dispute."

"A dilemma that escalates to the point of mistreatment."

"Whatever is happening with this other person, it's not about me."