

## Transitional kindergarten playgrounds: What's safe?

Lisa Konarski, SIA Prevention Services Director and CPSI

Are playgrounds part of your transitional kindergarten (TK) preparations? If not, they should be. Age-appropriate play equipment is necessary to ensure TK students can actively and safely play.

Playgrounds provide a multitude of benefits that are physical, cognitive and social. Climbing and other movement on a playground structure develops strength and flexibility. Children grow their intellect through observation, trial, and repeated experience on the horizontal ladder, swing or other equipment.



They create and enhance their social skills as they interact and learn how to take turns, work together and have fun. Play at recess also gives children time to expend energy so they can return to the classroom with renewed focus.

Children at different ages and stages of development require playground equipment that provides a challenge but that also is appropriate for their sizes and abilities. Through anthropometric studies, playground manufacturers design equipment to accommodate users ages 2 to 5 years old or 5 to 12 years old. Since 1999, California has required all public playground equipment to meet the ASTM F1487 Standard Consumer Safety Performance Specification for Playground Equipment for Public Use and the guidelines of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's Public Playground Safety Handbook. These documents

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## Cooperation and communication in conflict

Larry Dunn, Ph.D.

SIA Conflict Resolution Specialist

*This is the second part of a four-part Risk Review series on conflict.*

### Communication and conflict

Everyone understands the importance of communication for nearly all aspects of daily life. This includes both verbal and nonverbal messages, with physical posture and tone of voice conveying intent, interest (or disinterest), motivation, and even judgment alongside what we say.

Whether at work or home, perhaps there's no aspect of life where the understanding that comes from clear speaking and listening makes more of a difference than in our disagreements and conflicts. In most of our daily conversations, typical misstatements can be overlooked or even laughed about. But when these occur as part of our disagreements, they can lead us to feel offended, diminished or hurt. But communication that lends itself to cooperation helps us to not only resolve our conflicts constructively but also to prevent disagreements and misunderstandings from becoming harmful.

Before discussing several key cooperation skills, it's worth emphasizing the importance of just being present with someone who's upset, frustrated, angry or confused. Being present means devoting full attention to the other person's perceptions, setting aside one's own ideas, reactions and experiences, at least for the moment. When

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## What's safe?

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state the age-appropriate measurements and equipment applicable for school playgrounds.

Since kindergarten students are usually 5 years old, we often see playground equipment in the kindergarten area designated for the 5- to 12-year-old users. TK students are usually under the age of 5 and the equipment on a kindergarten playground may not be safe for their sizes and cognitive abilities. For example, the required height of a horizontal ladder for a 2- to 5-year-old user is 60 inches from the protective surfacing but 84 inches for a 5- to 12-year-old user – a significant difference. There's also equipment that a younger child may not have the understanding to negotiate. For example, a sliding pole is not appropriate on equipment designed for ages 2 to 5.

It's important to note that the equipment manufacturer will provide documentation and labeling for the ages of the intended users. District staff shouldn't post signage regarding the ages of the intended users without first confirming with the manufacturer documentation.

Some SIA districts are installing new equipment designated for ages 2 to 12 to accommodate their TK and kindergarten students. This equipment can meet the user requirements for 2- to 5-year-olds and still provide fun experiences for kindergarten students. Although measurements on this type of equipment still must meet requirements for ages 5 through 12, the equipment may not provide enough play challenges for children in upper elementary grades.

If you plan to purchase new playground equipment, work closely with your playground manufacturer representative to ensure that the ages of your users are understood. Ask for documentation on the age appropriateness of the equipment. SIA staff also can assist in reviewing your playground equipment design plans for age appropriateness, accessibility and potential safety concerns. For SIA assistance, email [PreventionServices@sia-jpa.org](mailto:PreventionServices@sia-jpa.org).

## Workplace Readiness Week – it's required for California high schools

**April 28-May 4**

New law requires California high schools, including charter schools, to observe Workplace Readiness Week during the week of April 28. The observance is to be integrated into the history-social science framework for grades 11 and 12.

The intent of the new law states that students are to be educated on the local, state and federal laws regarding wages, benefits, unsafe work conditions, unions, worker safety and more.

The new law also requires that minors seeking work permits be provided information explaining basic labor rights extended to workers.

AB 800 was approved in September 2023 and is Section 49110.5 of the Education Code. The California Department of Education is tasked with providing resources and instructional materials for teachers.



*Designed with school district leaders in mind.*



## Cooperation and communication

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confronted with a problem or conflict, we often jump straight to solving the problem, which may result in defensiveness or less than full understanding. Empowerment of others comes through being present with them, and presence should precede problem-solving. As leaders, being present with others helps people get connected to their own good ideas and inner resources for solving problems.

### Cooperation Skills: Supportiveness and Assertiveness

Cooperation involves two seemingly contradictory movements: asserting oneself and supporting the other. We can think of this as a kind of push and pull, moving back and forth between asserting one's own needs, interests and concerns (the "push") and working to understand the needs of others (the "pull"), both essential for good conflict management. Let's start with three supportive skills that make up the "pull" of listening.

My mentor and friend Dr. David Augsburg said that "being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable." Most people tend to think of themselves as good listeners. But when their actual skills are put to the test under duress or in conflict, they come up short, leaving others feeling less than cared for. Many approaches and techniques can help, but I find the skills of paraphrasing, openness and agreement are most helpful for keeping me focused on listening.

*Paraphrasing.* Paraphrasing is simply reflecting in one's own words the essence of what someone else has said. Good paraphrasing can slow down a fast or angry interaction, clarify communication, affirm the value of the other person, and demonstrate understanding. In fact, even if one gets it "wrong," paraphrasing shows the attempt to understand and allows the opportunity for correction.

Though there are different approaches to using this skill, I find three principles to be most helpful: focusing on the speaker; reflecting on both the content and feeling behind what's being said; and keeping it brief. A good example of these three principles put into action might be, "So you were really frustrated when I asked Marisol to take on this project instead of you."

*Openness.* A former colleague of mine says that we can go through life without asking a single question. You might be thinking to yourself, "How would that be possible?," which of course is a question! Her point is that often our questions reflect our own interests in what someone has said rather than what they need to tell us. Openness statements communicate a



willingness to hear about the other's perceptions, needs and concerns, even if those may be critical of me or in disagreement with what I think. Though it may be difficult to hear, we can invite others to tell us what's important to them by saying, "Please tell me more about...," or, "Give me an example of when you felt that way."

*Agreement.* The third supportive listening skill is agreement stating, acknowledging where we may agree – even if in some small way – with others in the midst of disagreement. In conflict, people naturally expect us to disagree with their points of view. Finding a point of agreement as part of our initial response to what someone has said can be effective in reducing defensiveness, providing a surprising early moment of cooperation. It may be challenging to find substantive agreement with another when in conflict, but we can often offer something like, "You know, I agree that this is something we should resolve."

When we approach someone with a concern about something we would like to see changed or done differently (the "push" of asserting), it's essential to communicate in a way that helps them clearly understand our needs and keeps them willing to listen. It's worth noting that, no matter how skillfully this is done, we need to be prepared to almost immediately go back to a more supportive posture, trusting that eventually our willingness to understand will invite others to respond similarly. As with listening, there are a few key assertive skills that can help make that possible: I-statements, preference statements and purpose statements.

*I-statements.* I-statements provide a clear message of concern that focuses on oneself, even though the intent is to bring about desired changes in the behavior of another person. I don't like to suggest being too rigid about any of these skills, but a simple

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formula provides us with a good way of confronting someone skillfully: name the feeling, name the specific problem behavior and describe the impact on you. Asserting in this way encourages us to take responsibility for our emotions, avoids blaming the other (reducing defensiveness), and addresses serious concerns in a way that values and prioritizes maintaining a good relationship.

A good I-statement might sound something like, "I was very disappointed [feeling] when you didn't submit the report on time [specific behavior] because it caused me to have to work overtime and reassure my supervisor that it would get done [impact on me]." Though conversation may follow that requires additional clarification and explanation, a good opening I-statement can become a bridge to constructive problem-solving on the way to resolving and preventing future misunderstanding and conflict.

*Preference.* When stressed, one person might state what they need in the form of a demand while someone else a little more conflict-averse might hope others would guess what they need. Both approaches create additional problems of their own. As an alternative skill, preference statements clearly and openly communicate preferences or desires, defining oneself clearly and inviting others to do the same.

This can take the form of saying, "What I'd really like to see done is..." "It would be helpful to me if you could..." or "If it were just me, I'd do it this way, but I'd like to hear what others think." In this way, one assertive cooperation skill can minimize the excesses of an overly directing or overly accommodating style by providing an alternative to the "my way or the highway" approach or just hoping that others will read my mind.

*Purpose.* As conflict escalates, we tend to see the unintentional comment or behavior as intentional, a carefully calculated act meant to insult, injure, mislead or just confuse. Because our perception is our reality, we may react to what we think others are doing in a way that puts us at cross-purposes with them, further exacerbating the problem. To avoid this when we're speaking, purpose stating makes known one's intentions, enabling others to understand what we're about and, if possible, cooperate with us to achieve our purpose.

### Enlarging Our Communication Toolbox

As a mediator, I regularly use these and other cooperation skills for identifying issues, understanding perspectives, and problem-solving for resolving conflicts among those who disagree. Anyone can learn each of these skills individually and use them effectively with just a little practice. More challenging is integrating them to engage others we may disagree with collaboratively, going back and forth between the "push" and the "pull" of being both assertive and supportive for resolving conflict.

Any skill useful in resolving conflict can be even more effective in preventing it. Adding these six cooperation skills to your professional toolbox can help you reduce the likelihood of destructive conflict and move complex issues to the status of "problem solved!"

## Promoting wellness at your worksite

Are you looking for a way to enhance your team's ability to work together, to reduce absenteeism or to improve morale? Promoting wellness at your school or worksite is a proven method for creating a productive work culture. A worksite team that feels their health and wellness is supported by management will be a stronger team. School staff who demonstrate healthy habits are also great models for our students.



Establishing a workplace that values the health and wellness of employees doesn't need to be complicated to be successful. Creating a wellness environment where staff are engaged will take some time and sincere effort. Here are some ideas and resources to get started:

- Invite staff to walk around your worksite during a break.
- Hold a healthy potluck. Staff can contribute ingredients for a salad buffet or burrito bar.
- Post positive messages in common areas including break rooms and restrooms.
- Get creative in sharing progress or steps for weight loss with a fun poster or online board. A fun competition can build accountability and promote team spirit, especially when encouragement is the foundation.

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## Wellness

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- Include a health message in your regular staff meetings. Look online for monthly health and wellness promotions for ideas and materials. For example, February is American Heart Month and March is National Nutrition Month.
- Take advantage and promote free webinars. SIA hosts webinars offered by Optum, our EAP provider. Your district doesn't need to participate in our EAP to utilize these trainings, and you can access the list via the calendar on our website [www.sia-jpa.org](http://www.sia-jpa.org).
- Remember, we work for schools, so incorporate some play into your day. Take a recess and throw a ball or play hopscotch.
- Have a physical or online bulletin board where staff can post healthy recipes or information on local farmers markets or upcoming fun runs.
- Compliment your staff when you see them doing positive wellness activities.

Employees with a sense of well-being bring the best to their work. Developing a culture of wellness at your worksite helps build teams that can collaborate, are resilient and give their best to our students.

## Leader Tip:

**A**pproach projects knowing that your team is the most important resource you have. Staffers' enthusiasm will make or break your project. Invest time in building trust and ensuring that everyone knows how to contribute to the big picture.

## SIA's Leadership Academy offers training for school leaders

**B**ecoming people leaders requires abilities different from the technical skills that lead to management positions. SIA believes that successful leaders make successful schools and that those in management can develop leadership skills. Managers, supervisors and other school staff in leadership positions can enhance their skills through the variety of trainings offered through SIA's Leadership Academy.

The Leadership Academy for the second half of the school year is:

**February 7** – Healthy Organizational Culture – 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. – in person

**March 22** – Conflict Management: Difficult Conversations – 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. – in person

**April 23** – Managing People: Personality and Communication Styles – 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. – in person

**May 17** – Set Expectations and Empower Your Team – 8:30 to 10:30 a.m. – virtual

To register for these courses, visit the calendar on our website at [www.sia-jpa.org](http://www.sia-jpa.org).

**Remember to visit our SIA website for upcoming trainings, useful forms, practical checklists and much more:**  
[www.sia-jpa.org](http://www.sia-jpa.org).

### QUOTE TO NOTE

*"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."*

– John Quincy Adams

**The material in this newsletter should be part of your Injury and Illness Prevention Plan (IIPP).**

**Keep a copy of this newsletter in your IIPP binder.**