



## **Fire Prevention: Conflict Management in Couple Relationships**

### Lesson Plan

**Objectives:**

1. Participants will learn strategies for successfully managing conflicts as well as behaviors to avoid.
2. Participants will learn effective problem solving strategies.
3. Participants will learn how conflict between parents affects children.
4. Participants will talk together about how they can improve conflict management in their relationships.
5. Participants will commit to making improvements in resolving conflicts in their relationships.
6. Participants will access community resources to help resolve conflicts.

**Materials:**

- DVD — *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Season 1, Disc 2, Episode 7, “Your Place or Mine?” (2:25-4:39)
- DVD player and television or a computer with a DVD drive and a projector
- Managing Conflict: True or False? handout with answer key for facilitators
- Participant binder pockets with handouts:
  - The Dos and Don’ts of Managing Conflicts handout
  - Managing Conflict: True or False? handout
  - Problem Solving Worksheet
  - Setting Goals for Managing Conflict worksheet
  - Resource list for your area (see Preparation note #1)
- SPEAK/HEAR skills cards
- Flip chart, dry erase board, etc.
- 1 balloon for demonstration
- Flip chart, overhead projector, or chalk board, etc.
- Pens
- Name tags
- Attendance sheet
- Materials for participant tables:
  - Play dough
  - Pipe cleaners
  - Paper and markers, etc.
- Participant incentives

## Session Overview:

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<b>Welcome and introductions</b>	(10-15 minutes)
<b>Opening discussion</b>	(5 minutes)
<b>Watch and discuss video clip</b>	(5 minutes)
<b>Discussion: What can get in the way of clear communication</b>	(10 minutes)
<b>Optional activity: Differences in communication style activity</b>	(5 minutes)
<b>Discussion: Don'ts of managing conflict</b>	(15 minute)
<b>Discussion: Topics of conflict</b>	(3 minutes)
<b>Discussion and activity: Dos of managing conflict</b>	(15 minutes)
<b>Discussion and activity: Problem solving</b>	
<b>Discuss Problem Solving Worksheet</b>	(5 minutes)
<b>Group practice with sample problem</b>	(10 minutes)
<b>Discussion: Healthy vs. unhealthy conflict</b>	(5-7 minutes)
<b>Resources</b>	(5 minutes)
<b>Activity: Setting goals for managing conflict</b>	(10 minutes)
<b>Introduce take home activity</b>	(1 minutes)
<b>Wrap Up</b>	(10 minutes)
 <i>Session total</i>	 (2 hours)

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**Preparation:**

1. Create a list of resources for your area to include in participant packets.
2. For the last “don’t” of conflict management, you will need a balloon to demonstrate the concept. Ask a participant to volunteer to blow up the balloon, then to let it deflate, as you are speaking. With this demonstration, you are illustrating that you don’t want to let angry feelings build up inside of you (like a balloon inflating) until they all come out at once and you lash out at your partner (like a balloon quickly deflating).
3. During this session, you will work with the entire group to solve a sample problem using the “Problem Solving Worksheet.” You may want to write out each step on flip chart paper or dry erase board ahead of time.
4. If possible, think about personal stories that you can share with participants throughout the lesson.
5. This lesson refers to partner conflict. If you have singles in your group, you may have them think about other or past relationships.

## Procedure:

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### 1. Welcome participants to the session and reconnect (10-15 minutes).

- Introduce yourself to the group and the title of today's lesson, "Fire Prevention: Managing Conflict in Couple Relationships."
- Welcome participants to the session and, especially if you have new participants, go around the room and have everyone briefly introduce themselves.
- Ask how everyone has been and about take home activities from the previous session (if applicable).

 **Say:** "*Today we are going to talk about ways to manage conflict.*"

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### 2. Opening question (5 minutes).

**Ask:** "*What does the word 'conflict' mean to you?*"

- Write participant answers on flip chart paper or dry erase board.

 **Say:** "*Many people think of conflict as something negative and something that should be avoided. However, some types of conflict can help our relationships. Conflict between partners is normal. It can benefit your relationship if you come up with solutions to problems and if it leads to positive changes.*

*How you handle conflict is more important than the fact that you have conflict. Today we are going to talk about managing conflict in your relationships. We are going to talk about some things that can influence conflict and some ways to manage conflict. Let's start off by watching a short video clip.*"

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### 3. Watch video clip and discuss (5 minutes).

- Before you play the clip, ask participants to think about how this family deals with conflict.
- Show a clip from the *Everybody Loves Raymond* episode titled, "Your Place or Mine?" (2:25-4:39).

**Ask:** "*How could they have handled this better?*"

 **Say:** “Everyone has their own way of dealing with conflict, but there are some ways of dealing with conflict that tend to work better than others. Today we are going to talk about some things that can get in the way of clear communication. We will also talk about some dos and don’ts of managing conflict in your relationships.”

#### 4. Discussion: What are some things that can get in the way of clear communication? (10 minutes).

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**Ask:** “Have you ever noticed that what you say is not always what your partner or others hear?”

“Do you find yourself thinking or saying, ‘That’s not what I said?’”

 **Say:** “Let’s talk about some things that can influence what we hear others saying as well as how we interpret it. In couple relationships, many big arguments happen because one partner misunderstands what the other partner is saying or what he or she meant.”

**Ask:** “What are some things that can influence what you hear and how you interpret a discussion you are having with your partner?”

- **Be sure to mention:**

- Mood
- Distractions
- Expectations
- Differences in communication styles

a. Your mood

**Ask:** “What about your **mood** or how you are feeling? Does that have an effect on how you interpret what you hear your partner say?”

 **Say:** “If you are having a bad day, are in a bad mood, are angry, or sad then that can influence what you hear your partner say and how you interpret a situation. You are more likely to interpret something your partner says as negative if you are in a bad mood.”

Example: “*You come home from a long, stressful day at work where your boss yelled at you about something, and your partner says, ‘The dishes are piling up again. I don’t know how we go through so many dishes!’*”

**Ask:** “*How would you respond if you were already in a bad mood?*”

**Say:** “*You might hear something more like, ‘How come you never do the dishes?’ when maybe your partner was just saying that there are a lot of dishes to be washed.*”

*If you need time to calm down or de-stress from a bad day, then ask your partner for that time before starting a conversation that is likely to lead into a fight. Let your partner know how you are feeling and if you need time to relax.”*

### b. Distractions

**Say:** “*Distractions can also influence what you hear your partner saying.*”

**Ask:** “*What are some things that can distract you from hearing your partner?*”

Sample responses:

- Watching television while your partner is talking
- Other noises going on in the room, such as children playing
- Being tired
- Feeling hungry

**Say:** “*If you are focused on something other than the conversation, then you are not likely to be listening well to what your partner is saying.*”

### c. Expectations

**Ask:** “*How do you think your expectations can affect what you hear your partner saying?*”

Example: You want to talk to your partner about both of you going to the movies with some friends. Your partner usually does not want to go out, so you expect your partner to say “no.”

**Ask:** “*If you expect your partner to say ‘no’ before you ask your partner, how do you think that can affect what you hear?*”

**Say:** “*People tend to hear what they are expecting to hear. If you expect that your partner is going to be mad about something before you even have the discussion, then you are more likely to see your partner’s response as anger, whether it really is or not.*”

#### d. Differences in communication style

**Ask:** “*Do you ever find that you and your partner seem to communicate very differently?*”

**Say:** “*Everyone has their own way of communicating. Some people like to talk about an issue for a long time, but others just try to avoid conflict.*”

**Ask:** “*Do you know people that would fit into both of these styles?*”

**Say:** “*We can’t work out conflicts if one person wants to talk about it and the other person doesn’t. If your partner isn’t ready to talk, give him or her some time. If your partner just wants to be listened to, show your partner that you care. Showing understanding toward your partner can really diffuse the situation.*

*The next time you are surprised by your partner’s response to what you say, think about whether or not your partner heard you correctly. If not, try to explain what you meant before you start arguing.”*

#### 5. Optional activity: Differences in communication style activity (5 minutes).

- For this activity, you, as the presenter, represent conflict.
- Stand in the center of the room and ask participants to place themselves (in relation to you) somewhere in the room that represents how they deal with conflict as soon as it comes up. For example, standing close to you might mean that they tend to deal with conflicts as they come up; standing far from you might mean that they try to avoid conflict.

- Have participants think about how far they are standing from you as well as whether they are facing towards you or away from you. Facing away from you could mean they tend to avoid conflict, whereas facing toward you could mean that they deal with conflict face-to-face.
- Ask a few participants to explain why they are standing where they are.

 **Say:** “*People have different ways of dealing with conflicts. Some prefer to avoid conflict and turn themselves away from it, but others may face it head on and get it resolved. It's important to understand and be sensitive to these differences because if not, they can lead to more conflict.*”

## 6. Discussion: The Don'ts of Conflict Management (15 minutes).

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 **Say:** “*Next we are going to talk about some things that should be avoided in your relationship because they only lead to more conflict and problems.*”

**Ask:** “*What are some actions or behaviors that lead to more problems?*”

 **Say:** “*A lot of different things can lead to problems, but there are four negative behaviors in a relationship that research shows are devastating for relationships:*

- *Criticism*
- *Contempt*
- *Defensiveness*
- *Stonewalling*

*We will start with these behaviors, and then discuss other don'ts of conflict management. You have a handout in your packets with each of these if you would like to follow along.”*

### 1. Don't Criticize

 **Say:** “*The first negative behavior is criticism.*”

**Ask:** “*What does it mean to criticize someone?*”

 **Say:** “*Criticism is about pointing out someone's faults and may be seen as an attack on the other person. Criticisms often include*

*words or phrases like ‘always,’ ‘never,’ ‘why are you so. . . ,’ or ‘you’re the kind of person who. . . ’”*

Examples of criticisms:

- “You are so lazy!”
- “Why can’t you remember *anything* that I tell you?”
- “You are so annoying!”
- “You *always* come home late!”
- “You *never* help me with the baby!”

*Words like ‘always’ and ‘never’ are trigger words because they can quickly lead the conversation into a fight. As we talk about in the Couple Communication lesson, these are sometimes called ‘fighting words.’”*

Example scenario:

**Ask:** “*If you are upset that your partner came home later than you expected, what might a criticism look like?*”

**Say:** “*Here is an example: ‘Why are you *always* coming home so late? You are so disrespectful. You don’t appreciate anything I do for you!’”*

**Ask:** “*What might be a better way to let someone know that you don’t like their behavior?*”

**Say:** “*Start with something positive and speak from your own point of view to let your partner know how his or her behavior makes you feel.”*

Example: ‘*I really care about you and I’m upset that you are coming home late again. I made dinner for us and you were not here to share it with me.*’

**Ask:** “*What is the difference between the first response and the second response to your partner coming home late?*”

**Say:** “*With the first response, you are pointing out something negative about your partner by saying that your partner ‘always’ comes home late and that your partner is disrespectful and doesn’t appreciate what you do.*

*With the second response, you are speaking from your own point of view and sharing your feelings about the situation. You are sharing how your partner coming home late makes you feel.”*

## **2. Don’t Show Contempt.**

**Say:** “*The second negative behavior that is harmful for relationships is contempt, which is showing dislike, hatred, or disapproval of another person.”*

**Ask:** “*How might we show contempt toward our partners?*”

Sample responses:

- Being sarcastic
- Name-calling
- Rolling your eyes
- Mocking your partner

**Say:** “*Contempt is about attacking your partner and trying to insult him or her, showing disgust toward your partner. It shows disrespect and, in the worst case, it is verbal abuse. Contempt is not only very hard on a relationship itself, but it is also hard on the individuals in the relationship.”*

## **3. Don’t Be Defensive.**

**Ask:** “*Why do we become defensive?*”

**Say:** “*When you feel like your partner is attacking you, you may become defensive to try to protect yourself. If you feel threatened or feel like your partner is attacking you, being defensive might be a way to protect yourself by basically saying, ‘it’s not me, it’s you.’ This is what defensiveness is about. Rather than making the situation better, it usually makes it worse.”*

**Ask:** “*How might someone be defensive when talking with a partner?*”

Sample responses:

- Criticizing your partner after your partner criticizes you.
- Saying things like, “I don’t do that, but you do all the time.”

**Say:** “Rather than becoming defensive and trying to attack your partner, try to accept and admit to any responsibility you have in the situation.”

#### 4. Don’t Stonewall (Withdraw).

**Say:** “*Stonewalling is when one partner completely withdraws from the conversation and doesn’t show any emotion or facial expressions. It usually happens when couples have been together for some time and at least one partner has often been very negative towards the other.*”

**Ask:** “What do you think stonewalling would do for the conversation? Will it help the situation? Will it hurt it?”

**Say:** “*Withdrawing from the conversation will not solve the problem. If your partner is mad about something and you completely tune him or her out, your partner is only going to get more upset.*

*If you need time to be alone or to get away from the disagreement for awhile, tell your partner that you need time to calm down and think about the issue. Agree on a time to discuss it later.”*

#### 5. Don’t let angry feelings build up.

**Say:** “*This brings us to our last ‘don’t’ of managing conflict, which is to not let your angry feelings build up inside of you then dump them on your partner all at once. It’s important to share your feelings and frustrations with your partner as soon as it is appropriate. Letting anger build up until you lash out at your partner is likely to lead your partner to become defensive and not want to listen to what you have to say. We can illustrate this with a balloon.*”

**\*\*Have a volunteer blow up the balloon as you are talking (see preparation note #3).**

*"As little things build up over time and you aren't sharing your feelings, you are becoming more and more angry, shown by the balloon getting larger and larger."*

**Ask:** *"What will happen when all the anger and frustrations build up so much that the balloon can't hold them all?"*

**\*\*Have the volunteer let the balloon quickly deflate by letting go of the opening.**

**Say:** *"It will burst. In much the same way, if we let all our anger build up inside of us until we are so full of negative emotions, we might lash out at our partner with the negative feelings all at once."*

## 7. Topics of conflict (3 minutes).

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**Ask:** *"What percent of couples do you think have conflict?"*

- Write participant responses on flip chart paper.

**Say:** *"100%. All couples have some conflict. Conflict is normal. How you deal with conflict is what is important."*

**Ask:** *"What are some typical topics that you and your partner have conflict over?"*

Sample responses:

- Money
- Trust
- Sex
- Jealousy
- Children
- In-laws
- Who does what around the house

**Ask:** *"Do you think that you and your partner have a good way of dealing with conflicts that come up in your relationship?" "What are some strategies you use?"*

## 8. Discussion: The Do's of Managing Conflict. Strategies for dealing with conflict in relationships (15 minutes).

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**Say:** “Next we are going to talk about some strategies that you can use to deal with conflicts that come up in your relationships. In your packets you have a handout titled, ‘Managing Conflict: True or False?’ Let’s read through those statements and try to decide if they are true or false.”

- Read through each question on the handout, asking participants if each statement is true or false.
- After reading each statement and having participants decide if they are true or false, go through the answers on the back of the True or False handout and expand on each one with the information below.
- Tell participants that the handout in their packets titled, “Managing Conflict: Dos” is on the back side of the “Managing Conflict: Don’ts” handout.

### 1. Set a time and a place to discuss an issue.

**Say:** “If you know that a discussion will become heated, take some time to calm down before you discuss the issue. Decide on a time and a place to talk about the issue when you are both ready and willing to discuss it calmly.”

### 2. Use your skills.

**Say:** “The SPEAK/HEAR skills (that we more fully discuss in the Couple Communication lesson) are skills that can be used for everyday conversation, but they are especially important when you are talking about difficult issues or are trying to solve a problem. These communication skills come from the words SPEAK and HEAR.

*In successful conversations, you SPEAK your point of view and your partner is trying to HEAR what you are saying. Although we use the word ‘hear,’ we really want you to listen to your partner, which is more about giving your partner attention and trying to understand your partner.”*

- Briefly review each skill on the SPEAK/HEAR skills card.

### 3. Start with a positive.

**Say:** “When you bring up a concern or issue, it’s important to be aware of how you say it. This relates to one of our SPEAK skills, which is to start with a positive and pay attention to what you say and how you say it. **Start a conversation on a positive note by starting soft and easing into your concern.**”

Example: “Pretend you are concerned about your partner going out with friends and leaving you at home, so you say, ‘I’m sick of you always going out with your friends and leaving me here at home to take care of our son.’”

**Ask:** “How might your partner react?” “How might you start that conversation with a positive?”

Possible answer: “I would like to spend more time with you. Maybe we could stay in together this weekend and hang out.”

**Say:** “**Discussions tend to end the same way that they begin.** If you bring up concerns in a warm tone and start with a positive, your partner will be more willing to have the discussion and the problem is more likely to be solved.”

#### 4. Accept influence.

**Say:** “**Respect your partner’s point of view and show that you are willing to look at the issue in a different way.** When you accept influence from your partner, you allow your partner’s thoughts and feelings to influence your own. You take your partner’s ideas into consideration.”

If you argue against your partner’s opinions every time your partner expresses him or herself, then where is your conversation going? Your partner is not going to feel like you heard and understood and your partner is not likely to show understanding toward you.”

**Ask:** “How might you show your partner that you are willing to see his or her point of view?”

**Say:** “You might ask your partner questions like, ‘**how do you feel about this?**’ or you might say, ‘**tell me why this is so important to you**’ or ‘**help me understand why you think that might be the**

**best decision.'** These statements show your partner that you are willing to listen and to try to understand what he or she is saying, which is much more likely to lead to a solution than arguing back and forth about your own opinions."

## 5. Solve heated arguments away from your children.

Say: "If a discussion with your partner or someone else is likely to become heated, make sure that your children are not around. Although children can learn successful problem solving skills when they see their parents solve conflicts respectfully, children who see their parents in conflict that shows negativity and disrespect are negatively affected.

**Researchers have found that children whose parents have a lot of conflict have a greater risk of** being aggressive, yelling, and hitting, and they are more likely to become depressed than children in families with less conflict.

**Children raised in homes with high conflict are also more likely to learn poor relationship skills.** You are a model for your children. Children imitate the behaviors they see in their parents, so if your children see you and your partner fighting and yelling, they are more likely to repeat those behaviors in their own relationships.

**There has also been some research on the effect of couple conflict on children's sleep.** Children need to feel relaxed and feel like they are in a safe environment when they are sleeping. If they are worried about their parents fighting, they are more likely to feel tense, stressed, and possibly scared, which affects their ability to fall asleep and to stay asleep.

**Children who do not get enough sleep are more likely to gain weight,** especially those who are not able to deal effectively with stress. So you can see that conflict in your couple relationship has many powerful effects."

## 6. Recognize things that can get in the way of clear communication.

Say: "Be aware when something may be affecting what you hear your partner saying. As we talked about earlier, think about how things like your mood, distractions, and your expectations about

*what your partner may be thinking can influence what you hear.”*

#### 7. Discuss 1<sup>st</sup>, problem solve 2<sup>nd</sup>.

● **Say:** “When you are discussing an issue, don’t rush into trying to solve the problem. Take time to fully discuss the issue and make sure that you and your partner share all of your feelings about the issue. **Work towards solutions only after each person expresses his or her point of view and feels heard.**”

#### 8. Calm yourself and your partner.

● **Say:** “Learn to recognize when a discussion is leading one or both of you to feel overwhelmed. **Take a break to relax and calm down before continuing the discussion.** If you become really angry or upset, you need to stop the discussion and let your partner know that you need to take a break. You don’t want to end up exploding and saying things that you will regret later.

*You may want to do some self-soothing techniques, such as relaxing your body and focusing on your breathing.”*

#### 9. Work towards a compromise.

● **Say:** “After you and your partner have fully discussed a problem and come up with possible solutions, decide on a compromise that you both agree with.

*Next we are going to talk about steps to solving a problem, which ends with finding a compromise.”*

#### 9. Discussion: Problem Solving Worksheet (5 minutes).

- Explain the “Problem Solving Worksheet” as you go through the steps of problem solving.
- Write out on flip chart paper, or a dry erase board, a brief statement to describe each step to problem solving, such as the highlighted phrases below in steps 1 through 6.

● **Say:** “There are a few steps you can take to solve problems. There is a worksheet in your packets that you can fill in to help you think through the process of solving a problem.”

1. *The first step is to find a time and a place to talk about the problem when you are both calm and able to focus.*
  2. *The second step is to identify each partner's concern. For example, if you are fighting about who should do the laundry after one partner has been at work all day and the other has taken care of your children all day, here is how you might express each partner's concern: 1) One partner's concern may be that he or she shouldn't have to do the laundry after being at work all day. 2) The other partner's concern may be that he or she feels that taking care of the children was a lot of work and that the other partner should help out more around the house. Once you have identified each partner's concern, write those concerns in the top two boxes on the 'Problem Solving Worksheet.'*
  3. *The third step is to think about possible solutions. This involves brainstorming ideas without judging them. Write out possible solutions in the next box on your worksheet.*
  4. *The fourth step is to choose a compromise you can both agree on. When deciding on a compromise, look at what you both identified as the concerns to make sure the compromise fits both concerns. Write out your compromise in the second to last box on your worksheet.*
  5. *Once a compromise is chosen, try it out. Give yourselves some time to see how the plan works (it may be a few weeks, a month, or even longer).*
  6. *Finally, go over the plan after you have given it some time. Ask yourselves, 'Is this plan working for us?' If not, that's okay. You may want to look again at the possible solutions you came up with add new ideas, and try to find a new compromise. Come up with a date when you will evaluate your plan and write it in the last box on your worksheet."*
- **Discuss the back side of the "Problem Solving Worksheet."**

 **Say:** "On the back of the handout, you can write down:

- *What each partner will do to help the plan work (specific things a partner will do or will avoid doing)*
- *How you will work out special circumstances (when something unexpected comes up and you cannot follow the plan)*
- *How each of you will work to support one another in the plan*

**We are going to work through a sample problem so we can see how this works."**

## **10. Activity: Practice problem solving as a whole group (10 minutes).**

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- Work as a whole group to solve a sample problem using the “Problem Solving Worksheet” and the problem solving steps described above.
- You may want to write each step from the “Problem Solving Worksheet” on flip chart paper or dry erase board so that you can complete it with participants.
- Have participants help you fill in the worksheet, asking questions like, “What do you think would be a good solution?”
- Following are some sample problems you may use for discussion:
  - Piles of dishes are often left in the sink for weeks.
  - Your partner stays out late more often than you would like.
  - You would like your partner to help out more with taking care of your child.

## **11. Discussion: Healthy vs. Unhealthy conflict (5-7 minutes).**

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**Ask:** *“How can you tell if the conflict you are having with your partner is healthy or unhealthy and is likely to get out of control?”*

**Say:** *“Conflict is not healthy if you don’t feel safe. Violence in any form (whether verbal, physical, or sexual) is never okay. If you know anyone who may be experiencing violence from their partner, encourage them to seek help. There are many resources available.”*

## **12. Resources (5 minutes).**

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- Share with participants local and national domestic violence hotline information and other resources, including local resources for managing conflict. (**The National Domestic Violence Hotline:** 1-800-799-SAFE (7233))

## **13. Activity: Setting goals for managing conflict (10 minutes).**

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- Have participants set goals for managing conflicts in relationships, using the “Setting Goals for Managing Conflict” worksheet in their packets.

**Say:** *“Take a few minutes now to come up with at least 2 goals you have for managing conflict in your relationships. In your packets, you have a worksheet you can use to write down your goals and a plan for meeting these goals. Think about what behaviors you want to increase and what behaviors you want to decrease.”*

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**14. Introduce take home activity (1 minute).**

 **Say:** “*Review the dos and don’ts of managing conflict that we talked about today and try to follow the Dos of managing conflicts. I also would like for you to take some time to practice solving a problem with the “Problem Solving Worksheet” and report back next time how it went.*”

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**15. Wrap up the session and give out incentives (10 minutes).**

- Ask if anyone has any general questions.
- Tell participants that they can call ParentLink’s WarmLine (1-800-552-8522) for questions about tonight’s lesson, problem-solving support, and for community resources.
- Thank participants for coming and participating in the lesson.
- Make sure everyone knows the day and location of the next session.

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