

# ACR 157 draft

Tue, Mar 21, 2023 12:12PM 19:30

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

classroom, paraprofessional, strategies, conflict, situation, students, work, team, important, staff, conflict resolution, special education, teacher, classrooms, staff member, big, relationships, build, easier, thought

## SPEAKERS

Veronica

---

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development.

I'm your host, Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. I am Chris Reeve. And today I'm going to talk about conflict resolution.

Have you ever had a situation in which a staff member said to you, you are not the boss of me? Because I have, and it's not fun. And the situation that got us to that point wasn't fun either.

Working with adults in the classroom can sometimes be a much bigger challenge than working with the students. It's a complicated situation, because you typically aren't in charge of the adults, you're not their boss, you didn't hire them. But you are typically evaluated on how well you work with them and how well your classroom team carries out its job.

So in last week's episode, 156, I talked about strategies to use to put in place to build teams and build collaboration in the classroom. And these strategies are ones that we use with everyone. And some were ones that really kind of set us up for success.

This week, I'm going to tackle the harder process, which is how to handle the conflict and the difficult relationships in the classroom. It's not a particularly fun topic for an episode. But I know that there are many of you that are struggling with this situation. I hear it from folks in the Academy, I hear from folks on social media, and I know well enough from working in so many classrooms over the years, how difficult it is.

Classrooms are very tough situations for leading a team or being on a team because you don't get to pick them. I've been in situations where teachers wanted me in their classrooms and situations where they wanted me anywhere but in their classrooms.

I've had that happen with paraprofessionals. I've had it happen with administrators. I've also run a program for students with severe behavior and worked with staff who were sometimes my right hand, and other times, not so much.

So today, I'm going to share some strategies that I've learned from all of those situations that I think can help you to resolve conflicts, to create more positive interactions amongst staff, and hopefully to develop a team that doesn't worry about who the boss of who is. So let's get started.

I ran across an amazing article, when I did some research for this episode. It's from Teacher Education and Special Education from CEC. It was written or published in 2019. And it was called "Developing the Balance: Preparing and Supporting Special Education Teachers to Work with Paraprofessionals." It's by Biggs, Gilson, and Carter, and I'll link to it in the show notes if you're interested in it.

They did in-depth interviews with members of educational teams in special ed, with 22 teachers and paraprofessionals altogether. And they were looking for what competencies the teams considered important for special ed teachers to work effectively with paras. What their recommendations were for how to gain these competencies.

Now, what I thought was really interesting about it, and I won't spend a lot of time on the article because I want to talk about your regular everyday life, but you know, there were things like knowing appropriate roles, knowing background, assertive communication skills, which I thought was an important one that I think we don't spend enough time training teachers how to do.

We tend not as a group to be a terribly assertive communicating people. We have a tendency to say, "Would you do this for me?" instead of, "do this for me," and we know that that doesn't work well with our students. And it's also a problem with staff. Collaboration skills, coaching skills, organization skills, I don't think any of those are surprising.

But one of the items that they mentioned and that many of them felt were important was conflict management skills, resolving conflict by making an effort to acknowledge each party's perspective and find resolution. And I thought that was a really interesting conclusion. And one of the things that they also said they had had no training on in their university work and often in their professional development within a district.

The majority also felt that it should have been addressed in their university work and at the district level in order for them to do their jobs effectively.

So if you are struggling with conflict resolution issues in your classroom, you are definitely not alone. Frankly, we've all encountered situations in which we had conflict with someone we work with.

It might have been a paraprofessional and a teacher who didn't see eye to eye about how to work with the students in the class. You might have been asked to help the teacher next door or the teacher who got a student that you worked with in the past, and that person may or may not have really wanted your input.

You might be a speech pathologist or a behavior specialist or consultant or instructional coach, who's trying to help a teacher who is struggling. And in many situations, you have no idea whether when you walk into a classroom, whether it's going to be your soulmate, who completes all your dreams and knows your sentences before they come out of your mouth, or your nemesis who cuts you off every time you try to speak. But chances are good if you're looking for ideas or asked to go help a teacher or professional, that you're struggling with a "you aren't the boss of me kind of situation.

So I've got five tips for making the situation's go more smoothly, and to build some conflict resolution. And that's what I thought I would share today. And okay, the first one really isn't conflict resolution, because it really works before the conflict shows up. It's really a preventive strategy.

This is gonna sound really shallow, this number one, but one of my biggest and most successful strategies when working with staff is to bring them stuff. Not stuff like coffee and donuts, although I'm sure that would work as well. But stuff like tools that make doing their job easier.

So working with teachers, I would bring in schedule visuals already made, or communication systems already laminated and cut up so that they would be able to actually put it into place and implement it when I made that recommendation.

In fact, when I was consulting long term in one specific district, I would often take materials with me so that I could pull them out during consultation when I talked about putting a strategy in place, and I could leave it with the classroom. And we started calling my purse the Mary Poppins bag, because A-

it is as big as Mary Poppins' bag, but also because I would often produce a lanyard of redirection visuals in one classroom, and a PECS book in another and a token board in another all out of the same bag to address the issues that we were having.

And being able to give them the tools to do what I was asking them to do made a big difference in helping them to take a giant step to actually making those changes and be accepting of it. I want you to think about this too, in the way that we recommend that when you work with students, we recommend that you pair yourselves with reinforcers, which basically means you build a relationship with them.

Now I get that you giving a paraprofessional a redirection visual lanyard may not be terribly reinforcing for all of us. Okay, I admit it is for me, I like things like that. But I'm not saying that that's necessarily going to be pairing yourself with reinforcement. But it is going to be taking down the negative thoughts about implementing the strategy you're asking them to do because you're not also saying and make all this material to do it as well.

It also makes trying something easier. It makes their job easier. And it shows that you're thinking of them and have what they need. I often will ask staff what they need to make their job easier and see if I can deliver that.

This is how you start a relationship. I mean, granted, it may not be the deepest relationship, but you don't need to have deep relationships to have a functional team.

So the next conflict resolution strategy is called Seek the Story. In order to have a good working team, you don't have to be best friends with everyone on the team. And in fact, there's benefits to having that not be the case. But you do have to have respect for them and have a relationship with them. In the same way that we build relationships with our students.

And I talked about building those relationships actually in episode 1 of the podcast way back 100-200 episodes ago, and it talks all about building staff relationships, and Episode 2 actually talks about building the classroom culture.

And so you can find them at [autismclassroomresources.com/episode1](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode1) or [/Episode2](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode2). More importantly, when you think there might be a conflict, it's really important to find out the person's story. Why are they there? Why did he choose to teach special education. What brought her to this place?

Find out what makes them tick, and what motivates them. We tend to assume that other educators are all in it for the same reasons. And hopefully, ultimately, we are all in it for the students.

However, there are different things that are important to each of us. Some people seek approval from the administration. Some are shy and just want to be seen as a good instructor. Some just love being with the students.

Whatever the reason is, find out what's going on and what is motivating for them. Find out what their story is, how they came to be here, why they think the way they do, because that's going to make it easier to have a discussion about it.

And while you're seeking that story, find out what else was going on in the other person's life. So many times I've worked with staff that are struggling, and I find out, they used to be the ones asked to help everybody else. And when I seek their story and ask them what's going on, I discover that things often outside of school have changed.

Everyone in school has a life outside of school. And if you don't, you need to. We have families and health issues and various life issues and crises that impact our ability to work 100% throughout our entire career.

You might find out that that staff member just started leaving her new baby a daycare for the first time, or that a speech pathologist mother is sick, or someone got divorced or is about to get divorced, or a child is sick.

There's so many different things that could be going on, that have nothing to do with you and the classroom, that it's really important to find out what's going on in the whole person's life. Because that's going to help understand why they're doing the things that they're doing. Don't assume, even if you work with that person every day, that you know everything they're going through. So seek the story.

Number three is to set them up for easy success. I do that in part by bringing the materials that they need along with me. But another is really one of the best pieces of advice that I ever got when I did my practicum and my internship in psychology way back in the dark ages.

And one of my faculty members told me to make my first suggestion to a client or their family be something that they could do easily and get a positive result right out of the starting gate, essentially, to give them a quick win. Come up with something that the teacher could do quickly and see an immediate change in the student's behavior or the running of the classroom.

If it's a paraprofessional, think of something that they can do really fast to see change in behavior. Now created, not everything they need to do is going to be quick or easy. And maybe the things that

now granted, not everything they need to do is going to be quick or easy. And maybe the things that you've prioritized as being most important, are not the quickest or the easiest.

But if you want to get someone to buy into the bigger tasks, getting some immediate reinforcement through success, because it's something you suggested they did, builds behavioral momentum. Sorry, I'm the behavior analyst at heart.

Essentially, what I'm saying is, it gives them that immediate reinforcement, and it makes it more likely they're going to come back for more, and they're going to keep going. It helps them see the possibilities and it helps them to invest in things that are going to take longer to see a difference.

Number four, is to seek the good that you can see and lead with it. Now I know that in some situations, you may be so fed up with a staff member or somebody on your team, that you can't see anything good that they're doing. But trust me, if you work really, really hard at it, and maybe ask somebody else for input and make a big effort, there is something that they're doing that is good.

Share this positive things that you see, no matter how small they are. Point them out. Show them that you are seeing things that they're doing well, otherwise it becomes demoralizing. Even things that may seem like a given to you is actually something that you should point out as a positive.

When I ran an autism program, we had a consultant who came to evaluate our program. And one of the things he started his feedback to the group was that we had built a program that clearly all of the staff really cared about the kids.

And at the time, I thought to myself, Oh my heavens, that is the only positive thing he can think to start with. Oh we're like in really big trouble. We are not doing as well as they thought we were.

However, in the 20 years since then, I have been in a lot of classrooms, a lot of classrooms and the I will tell you that what he said was actually a very big compliment and not something that should be taken for granted. It's huge. I've been in places where I can't say that to people as a positive, where I can't say they really care about the kids.

So if that's something that you see, even if it's a paraprofessional who is providing too much support to a student, and you know that they're doing it, because they really care about the kid, that's a positive.

The over support isn't, but the reason that they're doing it, and the way that they're interacting with them and caring about them is. Caring about the students is huge. And it's also something that you

can build on to build some common ground to build skills.

And finally, number five, not everyone will like you, and that's okay. Sometimes you can't solve the problem. Sometimes you just have to realize that you aren't going to be able to resolve the problem.

If you're a coach, or a consultant, or someone who has to continue to interact with the class with the teacher, you might suggest trying something that the other person doesn't think is a good idea. And give them a timeline. Could we try it for a week and see what happens? Can we try it for two weeks?

People will be more likely to buy into something that has a deadline, because they figure when it doesn't work, it's not going to stick around, and you're going to reevaluate it. And you're figuring when it does work, they'll see it, and they'll hopefully want it to stick around. If that doesn't work, then try developing a summary of what you have suggested.

Later in the series, I will talk about more strategies about this in the next couple episodes. For now, in this situation, put on your playlist on your drive home of whatever music helps you express your frustration while you're listening to it on the way home, or go for a run, or go for a bike ride, or whatever it is that helps you to disconnect from work.

The one thing I will say in this time that we're, that I'm recording this is don't if you have hit your head up against the wall over and over, and you've tried these strategies, and you're not changing somebody's point of view, and the conflict is still there, one of the things to think about is how can you go around the conflict rather than inflicting it on the classroom team over and over?

Maybe it's moving that person's responsibilities? Maybe it's giving them a different student? How can you problem solve how to avoid the issue as much as possible? That's not the greatest situation to be in. But I would rather have you have a way around it and not burn out than to have you continue to try to get the team to work as a functional team when they won't, and have you get burned out, discouraged, and quit.

So I would say, if you're listening to this podcast, you are probably pretty dedicated to teaching. And we need all of the dedicated people that we can get. So just keep that in mind.

If you're struggling with conflict in your classroom, come check us out in the Special Educator Academy. That's one of the whole reasons that I developed it. We have a whole SEA path focused on taking you through all of our resources to help train classroom staff and interact and build effective classroom teams.

And we have almost 500 members who get exactly what you're dealing with. And you can grab a seven day free trial at [specialeducatoracademy.com](http://specialeducatoracademy.com).

I hope you come back next week when I'll be talking about strategies to help you survive and thrive during observations of your classroom. And until then have a wonderful week.

Thanks so much for listening to today's episode of the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. For even more support, you can access free materials, webinars and video tips inside my free resource library. Sign up at [autismclassroomresources.com/free](http://autismclassroomresources.com/free). That's f-r-e-e or click the link in the show notes to join the free library today. I'll catch you again next week.