

# Conflict Prevention Through Relationships

*by Sophia Tutorial*



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how strengthening and maintaining relationships is essential to preventing conflict. The specific areas of focus include:

1. Communication Skills for Conflict Prevention
  - a. I-Statements
  - b. Assertive Communication
  - c. Active Listening
  - d. Clarifying Questions
2. Communication Skills in Practice

## 1. Communication Skills for Conflict Prevention

As helpful as conflict resolution can be, the ideal is to prevent conflict from happening altogether. Positive relationships are the foundation of **conflict prevention**.

It's impossible to fully prevent conflict, as any relationship will run into issues along the way, but there are several tools and techniques that you can use to give yourself the best chance of preventing a conflict, or at least of addressing it early on before it escalates.

Because conflict prevention is really about meeting unmet needs before or in the very early stages of conflict, communication tools in particular will be the most useful tools in these situations.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Conflict Prevention**

An attempt to meet the unmet needs of parties at the very earliest stage of conflict or before conflict begins.

#### **1a. I-Statements**

Confusing people with problems is at the root of most communication issues, as it often leads to blaming statements and character assassination.

Thus, separating people from problems starts with how you speak to someone; using I-statements allows you to own your feelings and needs.

➡ **EXAMPLE** Saying “I am upset when I come home and find the kitchen a mess. It makes me feel like I'm being ignored and that nobody takes my needs seriously” communicates the issue, your need, and your feelings. Whereas “You are so sloppy. Why don't you ever clean up the kitchen?” is an accusatory, blaming statement.

Blaming statements escalate a conflict, while I-statements really help separate people from problems.

### **1b. Assertive Communication**

Being assertive means using I-statements and truly feeling like you have a right to state your needs. While people often tend to be accommodating in order to avoid conflict, giving in and not speaking up can lead to underlying resentment, which can, in turn, cause tension that escalates into conflict.

### **1c. Active Listening**

In addition to being assertive about your own needs, effective communication involves listening to the other person.

As you've learned, active listening means listening to not only the content of someone's speech but to the underlying emotions as well.

In other words, active listening requires that you hear a message on two levels.

### **1d. Clarifying Questions**

A great way to show that you're listening to someone is by asking clarifying questions.

When you hear something through active listening, whether it be the emotion or the actual content of what the person is saying, asking questions like:

- Are you saying x?
- Or do you mean y?
- How did you feel about z?

Questions like these, help you get more information to clarify exactly what is being said and felt.

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## **2. Communication Skills in Practice**

Practicing these communication skills on a day-to-day basis will help strengthen and maintain relationships, which is the foundation of conflict prevention.

You could practice these communication skills with a spouse or significant other, a friend, or anyone you communicate with on a regular basis.

When issues arise, simply setting aside a time to actually sit down and talk about those particular issues is a great first step.

This is particularly true if you both tend to be busy, and don't have time to visit some of the smaller issues before they begin to escalate. Setting aside this time to talk will allow you to raise the issue, and then use the communication skills to discuss it.

In addition to separating people from problems, these skills can also be used to separate interests from positions.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You and your spouse are doing financial planning. You want to put more money into savings, but your spouse really wants to put that money toward a vacation. These are opposing positions, but there may be some mutual interests beneath them. The goal is to figure out how to work together to meet those mutual interests. Simply understanding that you can separate positions from interests is very helpful when having a discussion that seems difficult.

If you're on the verge of making a decision about something very important in the household, collaborative brainstorming rather than independent decision-making can be a good approach. You and the other members of the household can brainstorm several options, then evaluate them based on how they meet your mutual needs.



#### BIG IDEA

Preventing a conflict is always better than trying to resolve it once it has escalated. While preventing conflict is not always possible, you have the best chance of doing so by using the communication techniques and tools learned from the conflict resolution process. You can practice these skills on a day-to-day basis with family, friends, or anyone with whom you have a significant relationship.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **conflict prevention** begins at the relationship level, and involves meeting unmet needs before they result in a conflict between the parties. Preventing conflict will not always be possible, but using certain conflict resolution **communication skills** can go a long way toward that prevention. **I-statements, assertive communication, active listening, and clarifying questions** are all techniques that can help prevent a conflict from starting or escalating.

You now understand that it's important to **practice these communication skills** whenever possible with family, friends, and whoever else you share close relationships with. Setting aside a time to talk, and using communication to foster collaboration, will allow you to address issues proactively before they boil over. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### **Conflict Prevention**

An attempt to meet the unmet needs of parties at the very earliest stage of conflict or before conflict begins.