

# Peaceful Play:

## Guidelines and Strategies for Resolution to Conflict in Sport



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Guidelines for Conflict in Sport and  
Strategies for Resolution

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## Acknowledgements

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*Dean M. Ravizza, Ph.D.*

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## **Introduction**

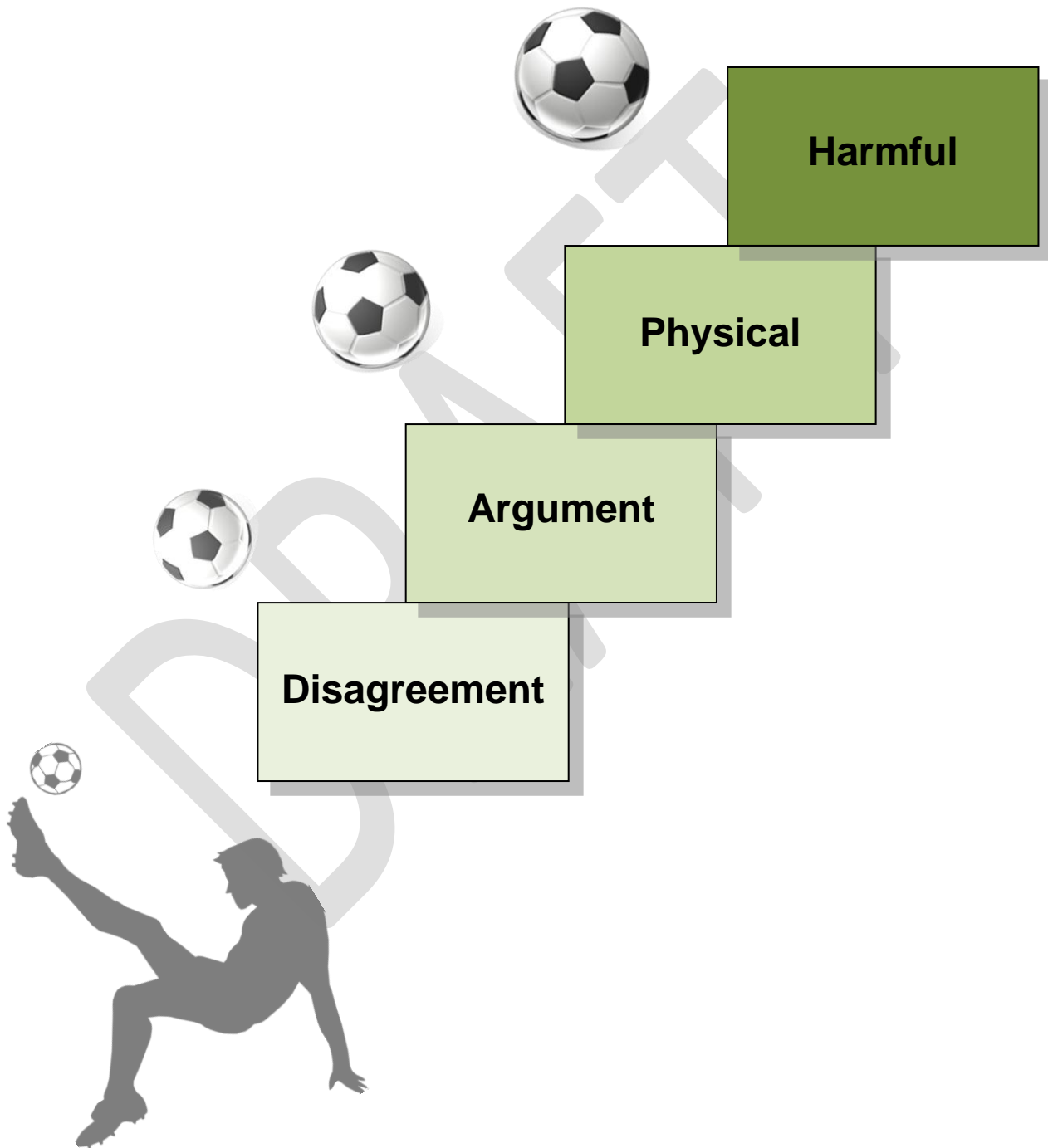
Engagement in sport is a purposeful way of creating an environment where individuals can work respectfully with each other toward a common goal. Participation in sport can teach individuals skills of handling conflict nonviolently. However, sport can also lead to taunting and fighting, thus undermining healthy social development and peaceful co-existence.

The four levels of conflict and strategies for resolution materialized from the outcomes of a long-term research project examining the uses of sport for children and youth in the conflict-affected districts in Northern Uganda. The research project included surveys of over four hundred children and youth from the conflict-affected districts of Gulu and Kitgum. Follow up interviews were conducted with a select group of survey participants to add greater insights into their thoughts surrounding sport. In addition, interviews were conducted with key community stakeholders including district officials, coaches from community-based programs, and sport teachers at local schools to greater understand the role of sport for children and youth in times of conflict.

Strategies for resolution to conflict that arises during participation in sport are essential to creating an environment that fosters understanding, tolerance, and peace. The strategies for resolution provided offer multiple means to use disputes as opportunities for utilizing conflict management skills without resorting to verbal abuse or physical violence.



## Levels of Conflict in Sport





## **Levels of Conflict in Sport:**

The four levels of conflict in sport include the disagreement, argument, physical, and harmful levels. Children and youth engaging in sport may present qualities of one or several of these levels. The levels are not progressive; children and youth engaging in sport may exhibit behaviors reflective of a higher level of conflict without displaying those in a lower level.

### **Disagreement:**

- These conflicts most often involve just two different views about a particular play or call. For example, the ball goes out of bounds during a soccer match. Both players believe it to be their possession. A decision is made directly for immediate resolution.

### **Argument:**

- An argument is an extension on a disagreement and beyond an immediate resolution. For example, two players run down the field with the ball and both end up on the ground. They argue as to whether a foul was committed and who is the one responsible. A simple, "I'm sorry" or "it's your team's turn for the possession" will not settle this situation.

### **Physical:**

- The physical level of conflict in sport is an instantaneous physical reaction to an event. For example, a player accidentally is pushed during play and responds immediately with a push to the opposing player. The physical aspect is often impulsive and is not done with malicious intent.

### **Harmful:**

- The harmful level includes deliberate retaliation. This level may or may not be preceded by the physical level. The player who seeks retaliation does not always seek resolution. A player involved in this level of conflict may be pushed accidentally while playing and wait all game for the opportunity to seek revenge. The player may also attack the opposing player after the game. Conversely, issues external to the sporting premise may also cause a player to cause harm to another. For instance, a dispute that originated between players within the community may extend to the playing field causing harm to those involved.



## Case Study

For over twenty years, conflict raged between a rebel army and government forces causing widespread insecurity and humanitarian crises throughout the northern region of the country and countries to the north and west. At the height of the conflict, more than 1.8 million people — or 80 percent of the population of the region — were forced to flee their homes and live in displacement camps providing



poor sanitation, threats to personal safety, and a lack of educational and economic opportunities. An estimated 1,000 individuals died in the camps each week.

The nature and duration of the conflict created tremendous humanitarian, social, and economic costs for the conflict-affected region, particularly for children and youth. Throughout the duration of the conflict, the rebel leader created his army primarily through the violent abduction of children. Tens of thousands of children and youth were abducted over the course of war making up nearly ninety percent of the rebel army. These children and youth were exposed to heinous levels of violence. They were forced to terrorize their own communities and commit acts of violence against anyone deemed unsympathetic to their cause including other children. Young girls



were frequently handed over to rebels to serve as wives and often victims of sexual violence leading to unwanted pregnancies or



Photo Credit: Google Images

sexually-transmitted infections. The insufficient security throughout the region and within the displacement camps led to tens of thousands of children seeking protection in town centers.

Many of the abducted children and youth fled the clutches of the rebel group when left unguarded or were rescued by government forces when the two crossed paths. The children and youth are often transported to interim care centers where they receive psychosocial counseling while awaiting reunification with family members. Former abductees engage in chores that help them adapt to the rhythms of community life. Some take part in vocational training to equip them with skills necessary for income-generating activities. Popular among the children and youth are activities such as music, cultural dance, and sport; the latter being held outside the centers in open spaces near to local schools.



Photo Credit: Ryan Freas



Not all children and youth associated with the rebel group pass through an interim care center. Other abductees wait for the opportunity to escape, and once free, they return directly to their respective communities to reunite with family members. Some former abductees return to school. Yet, like so many other war-affected children and youth, many lack the opportunity to attend school thus failing to derive the benefits of an education program. This is particularly true of girls who are less likely than boys to enroll in school upon reintegration. Many former abductees face increased levels of community stigma due to their forced participation in the conflict. They are often labeled as troublemakers who are overly aggressive towards each other and their non-abducted peers, and



therefore are excluded from many activities. Some children suffer disabilities as a result of the conflict, and as a result are also excluded from social opportunities like sport. Community stigma and the lack of knowledge on the part of coaches and sport teachers hinders the inclusion of children and youth with disabilities in sport.



Over the past two years, the region has seen an increase in stability leading many displaced families to leave the camps and return to their villages. A

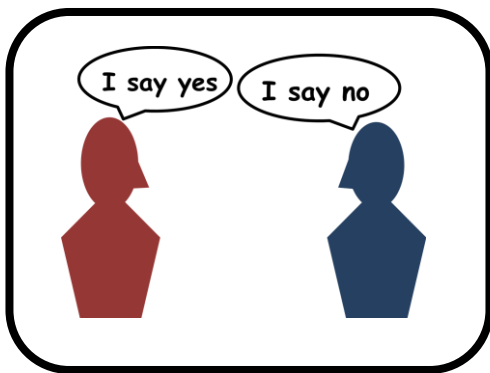


Photo Credit: Dean M. Ravizza

number of service, non-governmental, and community-based organizations have set up efforts to provide interventions for war-affected children and youth. Some interventions use sport to address issues related to healthy physical development like the avoidance of disease and chronic illnesses. Others capitalize on the inherent qualities of sport to teach issues related to social inclusion and reinforce socially acceptable behaviors. Despite the use of sport as a community-based intervention, most children and youth participate in sport at schools during free time or through organized activities led a by a teacher, student prefect, or administrator. Despite the popularity of sport as an intervention tool, many individuals leading these activities express a desire to build their technical capacity in order to increase program effectiveness in order to build inclusive communities that promote peace and stability.



## Conflict Scenario – Disagreement



### In Your Community:

Nancy and Justine are two children who live in the same village. Nancy's mother thinks going to school is very important. Justine's mother disagrees. She believes learning an income generating skill is more important than schooling in order to contribute to the family's well being. Just because they disagree does not mean that one is right and the other is wrong. It is important to consider someone else's point of view.



Photo Credit: Ryan Freas

Sarah and Kevine both enjoy netball and play aggressively. During a community game of netball, Sarah and Kevine play on opposing teams. As each is aggressive, they do not notice their intensity of play but other players do notice. After an accusation toward Sarah of being overly aggressive during a particular play, Sarah is considerate of where the other team stands on the issue and Kevine's team gets possession. However, a little later in the game, a player on Sarah's team accuses Kevine of being too aggressive. How can simple disagreements such as this be resolved during sports? Are there rules to be followed or expectations of good *sportsmanship*?

### Definitions:

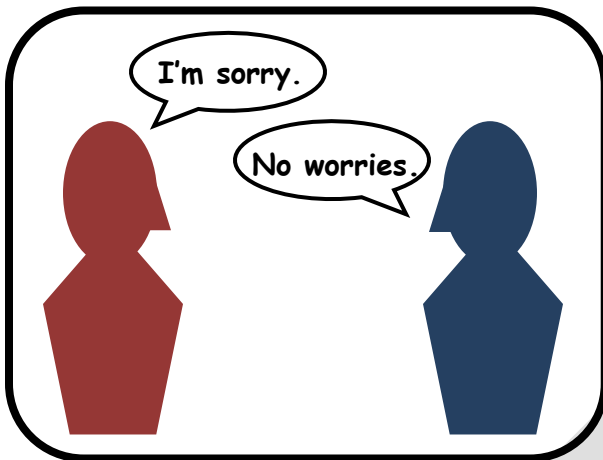
#### *Sportsmanship* –

- playing fair
- following the rules of the game
- respecting the judgment of referees and officials
- treating opponents with respect
- Treating the people you play with and against as you'd like to be treated yourself





## Strategies for Resolution - Disagreement



To help make these decisions for immediate resolution, the players often attribute the differing opinions to the *spirit of the game*. This spirit includes immediate forgiveness and resuming play. This level of conflict does not impede the natural flow of the game. If necessary, the teams just alternate possessions to keep the game fair and fight-free.

### Definitions:

#### *Spirit of the game* –

- play on
  - take turns gaining possession or favor
  - simple, quick apology and forgiveness
  - treating opponents with respect
- Spirit of sportsmanship that places the responsibility for fair play on the player
  - Highly competitive play is encouraged, but never at the expense of mutual respect among competitors, adherence to the agreed upon rules, or the basic joy of play.
  - Protection of these vital elements serves to eliminate unsportsmanlike conduct such as, taunting opposing players, dangerous aggression, belligerent intimidation, intentional infractions, or other 'win-at-all-costs' behavior

James and Jessie are both passionately going after a loose ball during a football match but the ball gets kicked out of bounds. Neither James nor Jessie is positive of who touched it last. Jessie suggests that since they both seemed to touch it at the same time that James's team would have possession this time and the next instance of an unsure call, Jessie's team would gain possession. Each team would alternate possessions after an uncertain play.



Photo Credit: Ryan Freas



## Conflict Scenario - Argument

Judith is a 16 year old female who attends a local secondary school. Judith was elected the female sport prefect at her school. She is responsible for organizing sporting opportunities for young girls at the school and often oversees younger female participants when not playing. Judith is frustrated by a number of the girls who engage in significant amounts of arguing during game play. They mostly argue for short periods of time; however, there are occasions when the arguments are prolonged and disrupt game play. What strategies can you share with Judith that would allow her to *resolve* these arguments?



### In Your Community:

Joseph and Anthony both greatly enjoy watching football. Joseph favors Manchester United while Anthony favors Arsenal. Every time each team plays, Joseph and Anthony begin to argue as to which is the better team. Obviously they will never agree on the issue. Their mutual friends are getting annoyed at the constant arguing and would rather simply watch and enjoy a well-played game of football. How would Joseph and Anthony resolve their issue?



Photo Credit: Ryan Freas

### Definitions:

*Resolve:* to find the answer or solution to a problem

- to come to a definite or earnest decision about an issue



## Strategies for Resolution - Argument

This is the first strategy that involves a third party. The most common reaction to an argument is to turn to an observer, most often the sports teacher, coach, or referee, who may guide the situation towards resolution. Referring to existing rules set in place is another strategy for resolution at this level of conflict. *Ground rules* should be put into place before play begins in order to serve as a reference point for potential conflict. Players temporarily forget the rules during intense play and need reminding.

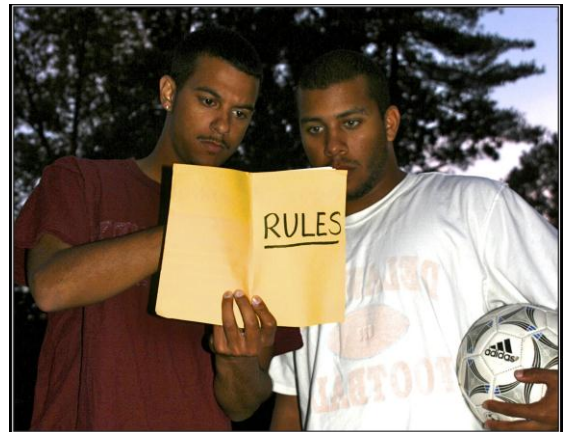


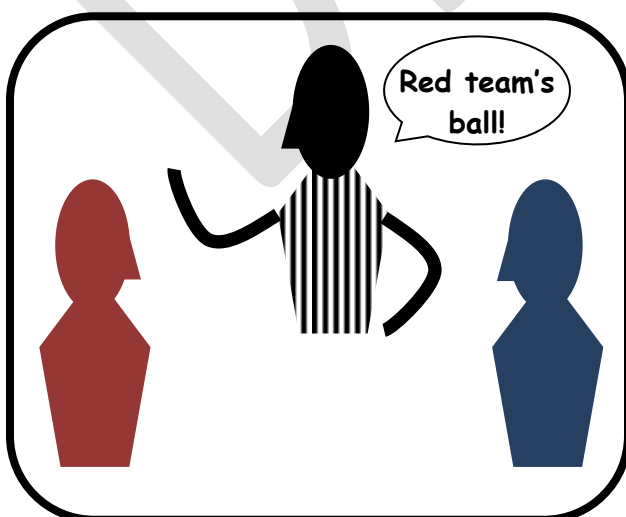
Photo Credit: Ryan Freas

Judith is tired of listening to the younger girls argue. As the sport prefect, she should review the rules of the game before play begins. That way, if any arguments arise during play, she can refer to the existing rules that were put in place and aware to everyone.

### Definitions:

*Ground Rules:* the basic rules or principles on which future actions or behaviour should be based

- Certain rules specially adopted for dealing with situations or circumstances arising chiefly from the particular nature of the playing area or the interference of spectators.

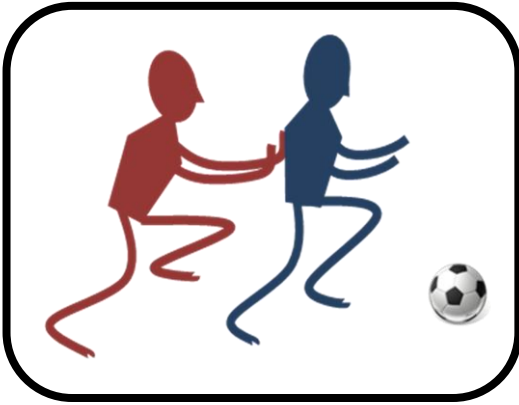


### In Your Community:

Toby and Kenneth are riding bicycles through town. They end up crashing their bicycles together but neither is sure of exactly what happened. They end up blaming each other. After realizing that no progress is being made in their situation, they turn to one of the several citizens who witnessed the accident to find out what really happened.



## Conflict Scenario - Physical



### In Your Community:

Sarah is waiting in line to purchase some fresh vegetables at the local market. Irene steps in front of Sarah in line. Sarah reacts instantaneously to this display of disrespect by stepping forward and nudging Irene out of the line with her hip. Is there another way that Sarah could have addressed Irene in this situation?

### Helpful Hints:

When provoked, consider counting slowly to 3 before reacting to a situation that may lead to physical violence. Use this time to contemplate more constructive ways to resolve the issue.

Peter is a 14 year old returnee who was abducted for approximately six months. When left alone while performing manual labor, Peter escaped the rebel group and was taken to an interim care center prior to his transition and re-entry to community life. Peter enjoys the sport component at the center and is eager to play football each day. While playing football one afternoon, an opposing player named Simon tackles Peter very hard knocking him to the ground. Simon stops to help Peter to his feet. However, Peter jumps to his feet and pushes Simon to the ground. Peter then accuses Simon of pushing him on purpose because he is a rebel. What would be an appropriate strategy to resolve this conflict?



Photo Credit: Ryan Freas



## Strategies for Resolution - Physical

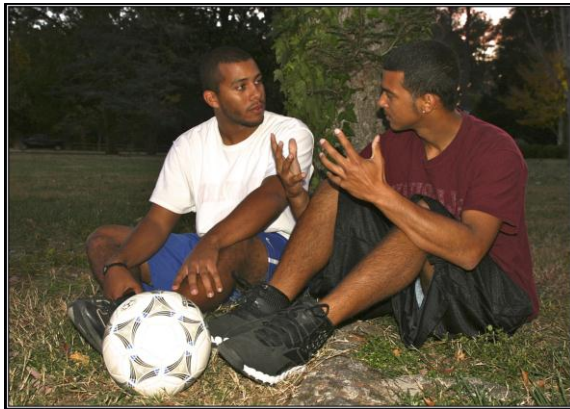


Photo Credit: Ryan Freas

### Definitions:

**Mutual:** possessed, experienced, or performed, by each of two or more with respect to the other; reciprocal: to have mutual respect.

**Agreement:** an arrangement that is accepted by all parties to a transaction.



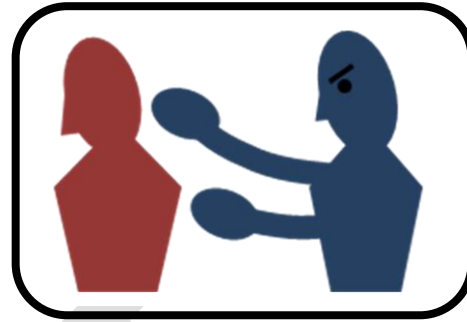
A physical response that may cause harm to an opposing player extends well beyond the disagreement and argument levels of conflict. The intervention by a sports teacher, coach, or referee will not necessarily resolve the conflict at this level. Temporary removal from the activity as suggested allows the players involved to come to a mutual agreement regarding the circumstances of the conflict. The participants may return to play only after an exchange of dialogue with resulting *mutual agreement*.

Peter and Simon are asked to leave the football match for fighting. They both want to return to play. A sport teacher suggests that they try to talk out the situation and when they come to an agreement, they may re-join the game. Peter thinks Simon is punishing him for being a rebel. But, after hearing the other side of the story, Peter finds out that that was not Simon's intention. He was just playing aggressively. Peter apologizes for making immediate assumptions and pushing Simon to the ground. Simon accepts his apology and apologizes for playing so aggressively. They both return to the game.



## Conflict Scenario – Harmful

Patrick enjoys playing volleyball and football at his local primary school. He plays with large numbers of his classmates in the sports period during the school day and often during free play time after school. Emmy also attends the same local primary school. He has returned to school after his abduction by a rebel group that lasted just over one year. During this time, Emmy raided numerous villages, including that of Patrick's family, burning homes, abducting children, and killing villagers. Among those villagers killed by Emmy and the rebels were Patrick's father, brother, and uncle. Patrick harbors resentment towards Emmy for taking the lives of his family members. During a football match, Patrick and Emmy compete on opposite teams. Feelings of anger begin to overtake Patrick while playing and he attempts to injure Emmy during game play. What strategies can you take to resolve this conflict between the two players to prevent one player causing harm to the other?



### Further Thoughts....

Youth have the ability to take an active role in community peace building situations. They also have the capacity to make decisions that involve conflict among their peers. Decisions can be made collectively among a group of youths who come to a consensus that brings about a peaceful solution.



Photo Credit: Ryan Freas



## Strategies for Resolution - Harmful

A resulting strategy to this level of conflict involves immediate removal of the offending player from the activity. From here several avenues can be taken. One option involves presenting the matter to community elders for a decision. Another option involves bringing the issue in front of a community-based youth governing body who are empowered with decision-making responsibilities. The latter strategy promotes *youth empowerment*, thus trusting youth to make the right decision. A third option, depending on the depth of emotional involvement, would include counseling for the parties involved to address underlying issues.

Emmy and Patrick have deep underlying issues that may never be resolved without outside help and guidance. Adult influences are very important regarding situations such as this. Children and youth emulate what they see adults do. Adults should be aware of their actions and reactions, especially when former child soldiers are involved. Coaches, teachers, and elders should lead children and youth by setting a good example.

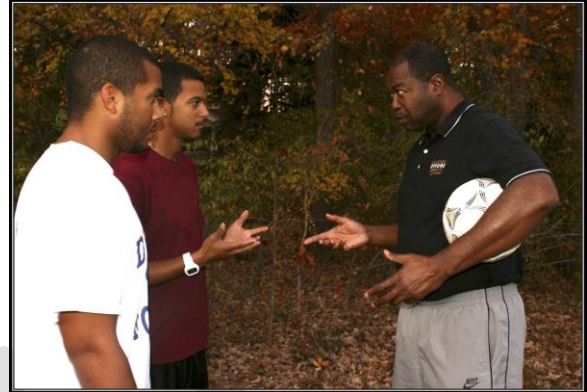
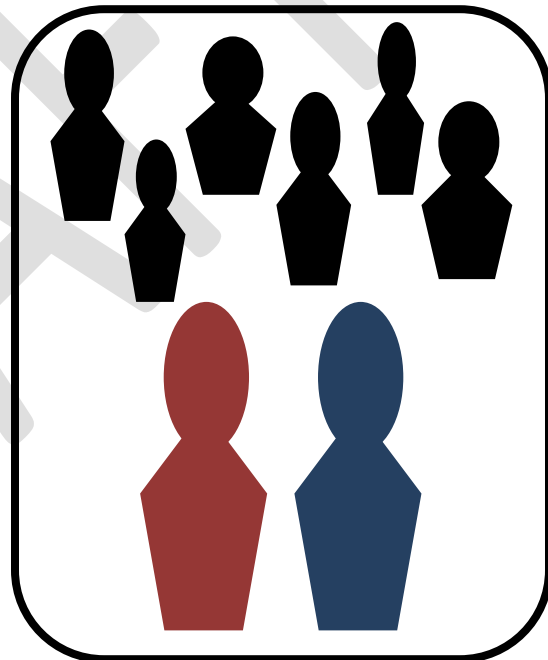


Photo Credit: Ryan Freas

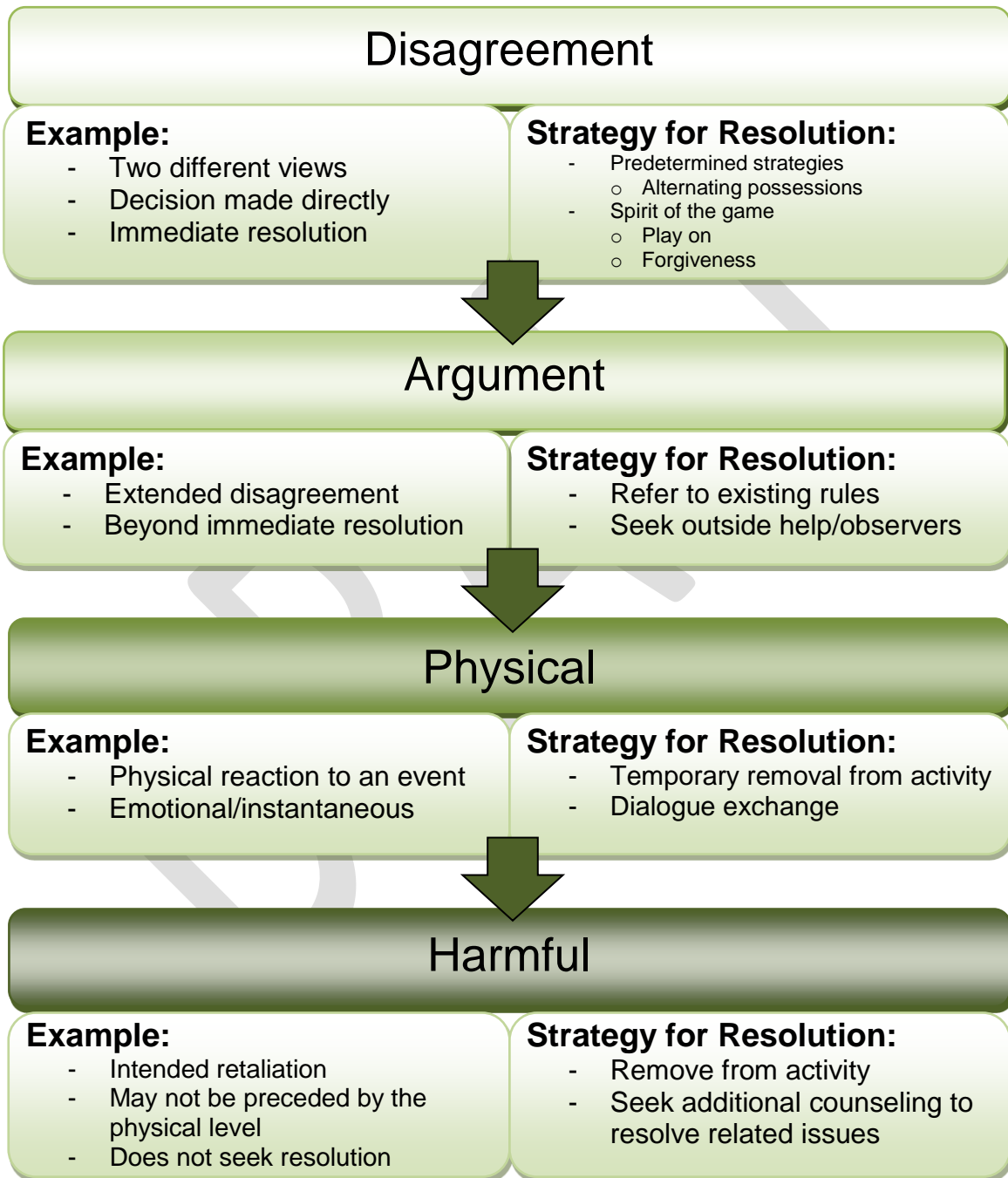


### Definitions:

*Youth Empowerment:* the giving or delegation of power or authority; authorization. The giving of an ability; enablement or permission. To give power or authority to children.



## Levels of Conflict in Sport and Strategies for Resolution

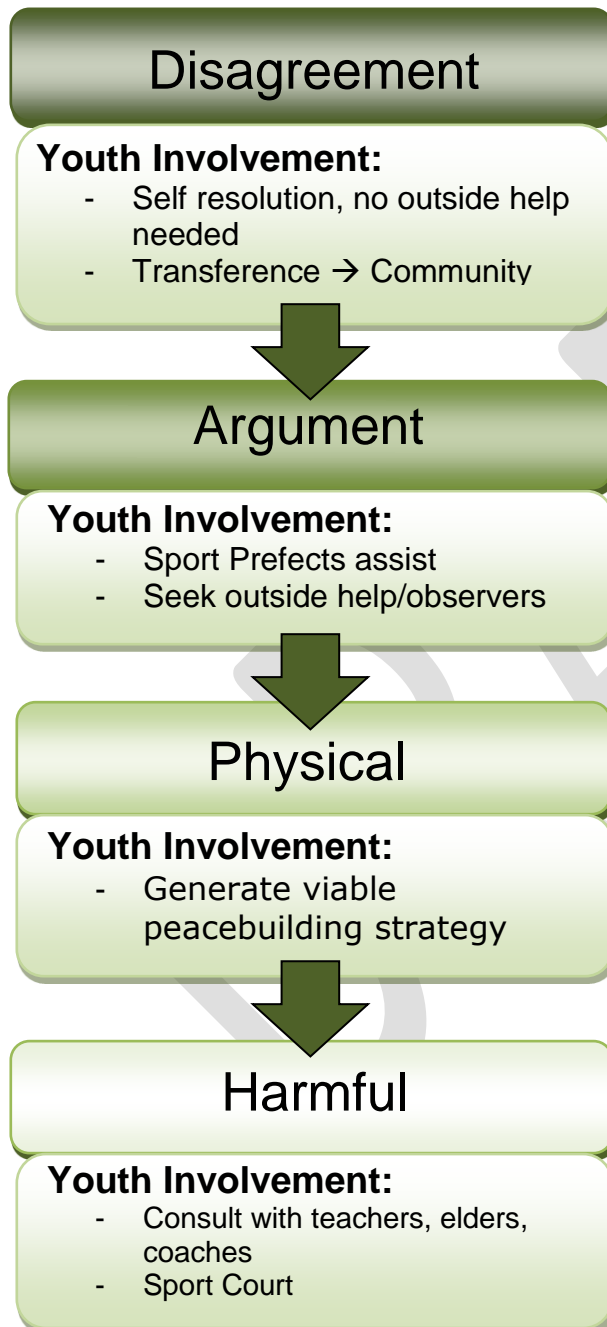


The preceding strategies may be implemented in order to resolve conflict during participation in sport. Adaptations may be made to these strategies depending on the nature of the conflict.





## Youth Empowerment



The concept of *Youth Empowerment* is often overlooked regardless of the fact that youth are highly capable of determining peacemaking strategies. Peaceful play recognizes the capacity of youth to be peacebuilders in their communities. The diagram illustrates strategies to empower youth to take on the responsibility of instituting peace in the playing environment. Because the largest number of youth participates at school, sport prefects would be a great beginning point to service peacebuilding.

The concepts learned could expand beyond the sport into other aspects of life. With the support of coaches, these adults could lead and filter the conduct and information to the players involved. Adults need to realize that they are a factor in peace making and should not marginalize the ability of youth to make significant contributions.

### Further Thoughts....

Divisions could be created, each facilitated by an adult in various geographical regions. Youth leaders are designated for each division and should a situation arise where more insight and opinions are needed, the youth and adult leaders meet to evaluate the conflict and suggest resolutions.



## Final Thoughts

Establishing strategies that help individuals manage conflict that arises in sport in constructive ways can facilitate the peace-building process. To enable sport to contribute to healthy development and peaceful play, disputes must be used as opportunities for imparting skills of managing conflict. These strategies for resolution should be part of a holistic approach to building sustained peace within communities facing conflict.



Photo Credit: Dean M. Ravizza





### Coach's Log

Please record any incident of conflict that occurs within your sport program. Then describe the strategy utilized to resolve this conflict.

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Which strategy was used to resolve this conflict? \_\_\_\_\_  
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*resolution*  
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