The purpose of this section is to assist the learner in acquiring basic skills in problem solving and conflict resolution.

KEY TERMS:
- Conflict
- Mediator
- S.T.O.P.

OBJECTIVES:
After completing this section the learner will be able to:
- Identify types of problems or conflicts that may arise while caring for a resident.
- Describe techniques to reduce tension when conflict arises.
- Describe the importance of documenting a problematic situation or conflict and what to document.
- Define S.T.O.P.
- Complete a S.T.O.P. form.
INTRODUCTION

Many different problems or conflicts can arise as you care for residents and manage the day-to-day operation of your adult foster home.

Problems you encounter may include:

- A resident who expects you to be their “personal maid”;
- A family member who regularly visits at mealtime and expects to be included in the meal;
- A relief caregiver who is always late for work.

How do you deal with such situations? Do you wait and hope things will get better? Do you assume you must put up with such problems and try to ignore them? Do you get angry and resentful?

The most effective way to deal with these types of issues is to be direct and bring them up as soon as possible. Immediate action may help prevent the situations from becoming conflicts.

As an adult foster home provider, sooner or later you will encounter an aggressive resident, family member or helping professional. The most common mistakes people make when others are aggressive are to become:

- **Defensive**: “You did such and so!” “I did not!” “Oh, yes, you did!” This type of exchange is usually dissatisfying to both parties.
- **Aggressive**: “How dare you scream at me like that. Just get out of my house!” This type of exchange can become violent or lead to hasty words, actions and decisions that are regretted later.
Active listening, sensitivity and focusing on the other person facilitate conflict resolution. Techniques can help you defuse conflicts and turn the occasion of another’s aggressiveness into an opportunity to improve your relationship.

- **Use nonverbal communication to reduce tension.** Consciously talk in a softened voice. Avoid crowding the other person. Make eye contact, but do not stare. Try to indicate that you are open to listening by keeping your arms by your side and your hands relaxed.

- **Focus on listening to what the person has to say.** Really listen. Respond to the person’s feelings and words. Make comments that indicate you hear what is being said. Acknowledging the message does not mean you necessarily agree with it. Remember, your opportunity to express your feelings and thoughts will come later. For example, “I can understand your being upset because I did not prevent your mother from wandering away yesterday.”

- **Use “I” messages.** Remember the three key elements: Describe the behavior that is bothering you; state how you feel; and describe the effect the situation is having on you. “When you yell, I feel threatened and I have a hard time hearing what you have to say.” It may be helpful to add what you would like to see changed or different. “I would like for us to try to discuss the situation calmly.”

- **Stick to your main point.** If the person tries to draw you into a side issue, stick to the central issue. “I will be glad to discuss your concerns about your mother’s care.”

- **Turn the person’s negatives into positives.** Do not defend yourself. Turn negative remarks around to your own advantage. Agree and then restate your position. “I agree that your mother seems more confused. I have been concerned about her, too. I would like very much to discuss what can be done to keep her safer. However, I’d like you to lower your voice.”

- **Set limits or take time out.** Sometimes, despite all your efforts and skill, situations deteriorate and communication comes to a halt. When you set
limits, you are taking steps to protect yourself from harm or exploitation by stating clearly what you will or will not accept, or what your next step will be.

» “Since you are continuing to swear at me, I must ask you to leave.”

» “I will be glad to discuss your concerns when you are calmer.”

When you suggest a time-out, you give both yourself and the other person an opportunity to sort out thoughts and feelings and approach the situation more constructively at a later time.

“We aren’t getting anywhere right now. I would like a time-out from this discussion until tomorrow morning.”

It is best to first practice conflict resolution skills in minor situations. Do not hesitate to draw in other members of the care team to assist you in resolving a problem.

“I’m not sure we can solve this problem by ourselves. If you would like, I could ask the visiting nurse or case manager to meet with us to help us come up with solutions.”

GENERAL GUIDELINES

The best way to handle such situations is to deal directly with them in a timely manner. Immediate action often prevents situations from becoming problems. When problems are experienced, follow these general steps for solving them:

• **Document the situation.** If the situation involved a resident, note the problem in the narrative or incident report in the resident’s record. Be specific. Describe what happened, where it occurred, who was involved, and the date and time. If you took immediate action, record what you did.
• **Use problem-solving skills.** You can reduce stress by developing and using effective problem-solving skills. Remember, there are more ways than one to approach a problem. The S.T.O.P. method, which is discussed later, helps generate options to consider when resolving problems or conflicts.

• **Discuss the problem with those involved, if possible.** Review the problem and discuss options for resolving it. Say what you are willing to do; offer positive choices. For example, if a family member gets prescriptions refilled for a resident, but is often late, you might suggest setting up an account for the resident at a pharmacy that delivers. The pharmacy would bill the resident or family. Making this kind of suggestion allows the family member to choose.

• **Select an option to try and set a time limit.** For example, try a certain course of action for three months; review results at the end of that period. Be ready with a back-up plan in case the first one does not seem to be working.

• **Bring in a mediator.** If those involved in the problem are not communicating, the problem will not get resolved. An “outside” person may be able to help everyone work together toward resolving the problem. The person could be the resident’s case manager, a counselor or social worker, health care professional or other person with whom everyone agrees to cooperate.

**The S.T.O.P. method**

The S.T.O.P. method is a problem-solving process that involves identifying a method and evaluating options. The steps are:

• **Describe the SITUATION.** Be specific. Your description should address the who, what, where and when in regard to the problem. If your description is general or vague, you may not have a clear understanding of what needs to be accomplished.
• **Identify your TARGET.** Describe how you want things to be; identify what you want to accomplish. You may find in the process that your expectations are unrealistic. Some situations or events are uncontrollable. You may need to accept this fact and work on strategies for coping with the problem and reducing stress, rather than on problem solutions.

• **Identify OPTIONS.** In what ways might you get the results you want? Write down all the options you can think of even if some of them seem silly. This is called “brainstorming.” Who knows? The one that seems craziest may be the one that really works! Ask others for ideas to add to your list. Sometimes people who are not directly involved in a situation may think of something that has not even crossed your mind.

• **Develop a PLAN and act upon it.** Follow these steps:
  
  » Evaluate your options. List the advantages and limitations of each.
  
  » Select an option. The option you choose may be the one with the most advantages and fewest limitations. Your selection may also be based on other criteria (e.g., least time consuming, least costly) or mutual agreement.
  
  » Implement the option. List steps to be taken. Set a time limit for trying the plan.
  
  » Evaluate results. Did you reach your target? If so, your problem is solved! If not, select another option, develop a new plan and carry it through. As an alternative, you may want to repeat the S.T.O.P. process, looking at the problem in view of the results.

A form has been developed for use with the S.T.O.P. method. An example of how the form is used and a sample form follow.
## S.T.O.P. FORM

1. Describe the SITUATION. What is the problem you want to solve?

2. Identify your TARGET. How do you want things to be?

3. Identify OPTIONS.
   
   (a) List them in the Options column below. Use additional sheets if necessary.
   
   (b) Identify advantages and limitations of each option in space provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPTIONS</th>
<th>ADVANTAGES</th>
<th>LIMITATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</table>

4. Develop PLAN and act upon it.
   
   (a) Select an option to try.
   
   (b) List steps to be taken. Note back-up plan, if any.
   
   (c) After trial period, evaluate results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option:</th>
<th>Time limit:</th>
<th>Steps to be taken:</th>
<th>Evaluation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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EXAMPLE OF HOW TO USE THE S.T.O.P. FORM

1. Describe the SITUATION. What is the problem you want to solve?
   
   *I am concerned that a resident, who takes several medications, may be experiencing side effects. I have tried to consult with the person’s doctor, but the doctor does not return my calls.*

2. Identify your TARGET. How do you want things to be?
   
   *I want instructions from the doctor on what I should do.*

3. Identify OPTIONS.
   
   (a) List them in the Options column below. Use additional sheets if necessary.

   (b) Identify advantages and limitations of each option in space provided.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPTIONS</th>
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<th>LIMITATIONS</th>
</tr>
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(Continued on next page)
1. Call every day.

He’ll know I’m persistent and concerned about his patient.

He may get annoyed that I call so often.

Calling every day takes up time I don’t need to spend this way.

2. Talk with the nurse.

She may be able to tell me what I need to know or give me suggestions to try.

She may be able to let the doctor know my concern about his patient and encourage him to call me, or discuss the problem and call me back with recommendations.

3. Have family call the doctor.

The doctor may respond better to requests from the family.

The doctor may get annoyed that the family is calling.

The family and I agreed that I would assume responsibility for contacting the doctor about medical concerns.

4. Develop PLAN and act upon it.

(a) Select an option to try.

(b) List steps to be taken. Note back-up plan, if any.

(c) After trial period, evaluate results.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Option:</strong></th>
<th><em>Talk with nurse.</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time limit:</strong></td>
<td><em>2 days</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Steps to be taken:</strong></td>
<td><em>Call doctor’s office. Ask to speak to the nurse. Identify yourself and relationship to patient. State your concerns about drug side effects. Emphasize need for advice. Mention that calls to the doctor have not been returned. Be ready to answer questions; have resident’s chart in hand. Ask for suggestions. If nurse puts you off, say, “I will call back at (give specific time) for information.” Let the nurse know choosing a specific time will assure you are available. Follow through. Be sure to thank nurse.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation:</strong></td>
<td><em>Nurse helpful. Order received the following day. The office nurse indicated that I should call her when I have questions in the future.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>