

The Right Ways to Argue in Front of Your Children

It's best not to hide many disagreements; parents can model how to peacefully break an impasse with someone they love

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Many parents were raised believing the old rule: Never fight in front of the children.

New research suggests it's time for a more nuanced view. Parents who can resolve conflicts and emerge with warm feelings toward each other instill better coping skills and emotional security in children, studies show.

This requires admirable self-control, and not all marital battles can be worked out so calmly. It's hard to avoid losing your cool over such third-rail topics as infidelity. Marital battles that spark uncontrolled emotional outbursts should happen in private or in the presence of a therapist, and name-calling, threats or other forms of aggression are never OK.

But seeing Mom and Dad emerge from less intractable disagreements satisfied, without resentment, can yield big rewards for children, according to researchers and experts in conflict resolution.

“If you can say, ‘Well, I’m mad at you for this,’ but focus on a future solution, and your children are hearing this, they’re going to believe that really good things can come out of disagreements,” says Laurie Puhn, a New York-based attorney, mediator and author of “Fight Less, Love More.”

Middle-school students whose parents resolved conflicts to their satisfaction showed better coping skills a year later. That included confidence they could deal with their parents’ arguments and better behavior, according to a 2017 study by Nan Zhou, an associate professor in the education faculty at Beijing Normal

University, and Cheryl Buehler, a professor of human development and family studies at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

Parents who expressed warmth and empathy toward each other during arguments also fostered a sense of security in their children that their families would be OK, according to their two-year study of 416 U.S. families.

The research complements findings from a 2009 study that children whose parents have constructive conflicts, showing support and affection for each other, exhibit better social skills, including cooperation and empathy for peers.

Dan Shapiro and his wife, Mia, sometimes deliberately work out some disagreements in front of their three sons, ages 7 to 13. “We want our children to see that conflict isn’t bad and that one can learn a lot from it,” says Dr. Shapiro, author of “Negotiating the Nonnegotiable” and director of the Harvard International Negotiation Program in Cambridge, Mass.

Dr. Shapiro says he strives for harmony rather than victory and avoids digging in on a particular position. If he feels himself getting emotional during a disagreement, he recalls some of his and Mia’s happiest times: their wedding day or laughing together at their sons’ jokes. “Those memories open up space in my mind,” he says.

Showing appreciation for your partner can be a powerful motivator to reconcile, Dr. Shapiro says. If tensions surface after he’s been traveling on business, leaving Mia to manage her part-time job, home and family on her own, he makes a point of asking her what her week was like, acknowledging her hard work. “In almost any family conflict, everybody’s craving, and longing, is to feel appreciated, to feel heard and understood and valued,” Dr. Shapiro says.

They make a point of reassuring their sons after a dispute, saying, “We had a disagreement, but Mommy and Daddy talked about it and we resolved it and it’s OK,” Dr. Shapiro says.

The aftermath of parental arguments is at least as important as the battle itself. Children have keen emotional radars. Unresolved tensions after a parental disagreement are linked to increased anxiety, depression and social phobia in children eight years later, according to a 2016 study led by Rebecca Brock, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

“If parents leave issues unresolved and there is a lingering undercurrent of tension, kids are going to pick up on that,” Dr. Brock says.

And if parental arguments recur or drag on for more than a week, offering reassurance can be helpful for children. Ms. Puhn suggests saying, “Daddy and I are a team, and we work together. We’re having a tough time and we’re having some fights, but we’re working on resolving them and we will resolve them. You might hear a little more noise, but I don’t want you to worry about it, because we’re a team. And we’re going to figure it out,” she says.

Small children may need to see physical signs that parents have reconciled, like a hug.

Even if parents fight sometimes, a higher ratio of positive to negative exchanges is linked to less sadness and worry in children and teens, according to a recent five-year study of 809 families. Displays of warmth and mutual support helped offset children’s fears about parental discord.

To maintain a positive climate, avoid what Ms. Puhn calls revolving-door battles—repeated arguments over chronic complaints or immutable differences that go nowhere. Research shows 69% of conflicts between couples focus on perpetual problems that remain unresolved.

In the case of one couple Dr. Shapiro met, the husband was a die-hard Republican and the wife an avowed Democrat. To avoid ceaseless conflict, they agreed to confine all talk of politics to Tuesday nights. “The rest of the week, the subject was taboo,” Dr. Shapiro says.

If your fights tend to snowball into a storm of anger, blaming and threats, you’re fighting about the wrong problem, Ms. Puhn says.

Focus on problems that can be solved, Ms. Puhn says. Say your spouse angers you by buying two expensive hockey sticks for your child that you believe the family can’t afford. Attacking him isn’t likely to work, Ms. Puhn says. “What is he going to say? ‘You’re right, we can’t afford them, I’m going to go return them?’ No,” she says.

Instead, work toward a future solution. Say: “I know you already bought the hockey sticks and our son is happy to have them. We’ll keep them, but can we come up with a policy on a spending limit that we set, that we know we don’t

exceed unless we've talked about it and we both agree?" Ms. Puhn says. "A really important part of a good fight is that your partner has to be part of the solution."

TO HAVE ARGUMENTS YOUR CHILD CAN LEARN FROM:

- * Acknowledge your partner's feelings and views.
- * Ask for advice on how to solve a problem, rather than hurling blame.
- * Restrict fights over chronic areas of conflict to a limited amount of time, like one day a week.
- * Keep disputes under control by focusing only on the problem at hand, rather than old sources of resentment.
- * Look together for solutions, rather than squaring off to do battle.
- * For small children, use physical gestures to show you've made up, like a hug.
- * Consider role-playing constructive problem-solving for your children.