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Handling Conflict without Harming Children

by Summer Stanley



While no household is without its share of arguments and disagreements, it's important to note that how these conflicts are handled can have a lasting effect on children in the home.

How often the parents fight; how intense, angry, or hurtful the arguments are; and how long such conflicts last are all factors in the child's adjustment. Interestingly, a study by the University of York found that the arguments that parents have during the marriage tend to have longer-lasting effects on children than the actual split itself.

In addition to hurting a child's ability to identify and control emotions, aggression between parents can negatively impact a child's academic performance. Conflict in the home affects a child's stress hormones, altering his or her brain functioning over time. This can lead to impaired thinking, lack of problem-solving and reasoning skills, and memory problems.

According to Rabbi Yisroel Roll, a licensed child psychotherapist, parental conflict can lead to a drop in a child's emotional security. "A child needs emotional safety and security in order to thrive academically and socially," he says. "The environment in the home between the parents creates that sense of security. That's the child's world. When there is conflict, argument, [and] tension between the parents, that basically shatters the secure safety net of the children."

When parents successfully resolve arguments, children can learn important, positive lessons that can help them navigate their own emotions and relationships inside and outside the home.

Tips for Resolving Conflict

Family therapist Sheri Glucoft Wong shares her top five tips to help parents resolve conflict, maintain a loving relationship, and role-model effective problem-solving for children:



1. Lead with empathy: Open the dialogue by first letting the other person know that you see them, you get them, and you can put yourself in their shoes. Example: "I know it must be hard to leave work...."



2. Give your partner the benefit of the doubt. Assume the best intentions and help yourself remember that you love each other by adding a term of endearment. Example: "I know you didn't mean to team up with the kids against me, Sweetheart...."



3. Remember that you're on the same team. Deal with issues by laying all the cards on the table and looking at them together to solve a dilemma rather than digging in on opposing sides. Then problem-solve with one another. That way, you both "own" the solution.



4. Constructive criticism works only when your partner can do something about what happened. If the deadline for soccer signup was already missed, remedy the current situation as best as possible and talk about how to do it better next time. Blaming won't fix anything that's already happened.



5. Anything that needs to be said can be said with kindness. Disapproval, disappointment, exasperation—all can be handled better with kindness.

Resources:

"Exposure to Aggression Between Parents Can Interfere with a Child's Ability to Regulate Emotions," accessed July 9, 2018, from <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/site/ataglance/2014/09/fighting-parents-hurt-childrens-ability-to-regulate-emotions-finds-study-by-psychologists-atnyu-steinhardt.html>

"What All Parents Need to Know About Arguing in Front of Their Children," accessed July 9, 2018, from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/family/what-all-parents-need-to-know-about-arguing-in-front-of-their-ch/>

"Parental Conflict," accessed July 9, 2018, from <https://betteroptionsinc.org/our-beliefs/parental-conflict/>

"Parental Conflict and Its Effects on Children," accessed July 9, 2018, from <https://www.education.com/magazine/article/conflict-impacton-kids/>

"Parental Conflicts & Their Damaging Effects on Children," accessed July 9, 2018, from <https://www.livestrong.com/article/513540-parental-conflicts-their-damaging-effects-on-children/>

"How Parents' Arguments Really Affect Their Children," accessed July 10, 2018, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-43486641>

"What Happens to Children When Parents Fight," accessed July 10, 2018, from <http://www.developmentalscience.com/blog/2014/04/30/what-happens-to-children-when-parents-fight>

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