



Family Arguments

We seem to have a lot of arguments in our family. Is this normal?

Disputes between you and your children are inevitable in family life. If your family never has arguments, it probably means that issues are being avoided. To become productive adults, children need to be able to voice their opinions - even if they disagree with yours - and feel they are being taken seriously.

Even so, you can and should keep the negative impact of arguments to a minimum.

Pick Your Battles

Be selective about the issues you fight over. When a potential problem arises, decide if it is really worth the battle; some issues probably are not. For example, if your child wants to wear an old pair of sneakers to school rather than the newer pair you recently bought her, or if she wants to wear her hair a little longer than you would prefer, you might decide to let her have her way, choosing to take a stand on more important matters instead. Pick your battles carefully.

Be Open

Let your child win sometimes. When you and your youngster argue, you need to do more than listen to her point of view; when she presents a persuasive case, be willing to say, "You convinced me. We'll do it your way." Let your youngster know that you value her point of view, and that through communication, conflicts can be resolved - and that sometimes she can win.

Boundaries For Arguments

As long as arguments stay within certain boundaries, they are an acceptable and productive form of communication. They can continue as long as they are under control, respectful and are moving toward a solution. But discontinue them if they degenerate into name-calling, if calm voices are replaced by shouting or if you and your child are going around in circles without progressing toward a resolution. Never laugh at your child, no matter how ludicrous her arguments sound to you; by laughing you are essentially ridiculing her and what she is saying.

If you are unhappy with the essay your child wrote about the Civil War for school, for example, the two of you can discuss what you perceive to be its shortcomings. But remember, it is her school assignment and her responsibility. Her teacher is the ultimate judge. If the dialogue between you and your child starts to get personal ("You don't know what you're talking about!"), then it's time for a break. Tell your child: "This discussion isn't going anywhere. We need to stop, cool down and come back to it later." Resume the dialogue later in the day, when one or both of you might have a new approach to the problem.

Some families actually schedule these follow-up discussions. A parent might say, "Come back with five points to support your argument, and I'll have five to support mine." Families can even create a format for these dialogues: The child speaks uninterrupted for five minutes, and then the parent responds during the next five minutes; after another round of five minutes each, you might find areas where you can agree or compromise.

Recurrent Conflicts

If conflicts about particular issues recur again and again, take a look at the root causes. Think deeply about why you and your child are arguing about these matters, and try taking some preventive action.

For example, if your youngster rebels against going to bed each night, she may be using her outbursts as a way to stay up a little longer, or to get more attention. Or if she repeatedly argues about doing her homework, try to put an end to these conflicts by actually writing up a contract stipulating the expectations, responsibilities, rewards and punishments for doing and not doing homework. Remember that the homework assignment is made by the teacher and is your child's responsibility. She may not do it your way, but if she is satisfying the school's requirements, you should not turn it into an issue at home. Both you and your child should sign the contract, agree to abide by it, and (as fully) end the disagreements about the subject.

Alliances

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Some families draw a third person into the conflict, supposedly to mediate the difficulty, but who instead may take a position on one side or the other and thereby make the disagreement worse. Sometimes when they are unable to resolve their conflict, the warring parties may join together to focus attention on another family member as a way to avoid dealing with the real problem.

Within every family, certain alliances, coalitions and rivalries exist. At times, mother and daughter might form an alliance against father and son. Or the two parents might unite against the children on a particular issue. But within a healthy family these coalitions are not fixed, they change from situation to situation, and they do not disrupt the functioning of the family. If they become rigid and long-lasting, however, they can do damage to the family.

It is natural to be unaware that any alliances exist within your family. But to get a better sense of your family's dynamics, ask yourself questions like: "What family member do I tend to agree (or disagree) with most often? When my children are fighting, whose side do I generally take? With whom in the family do I usually spend my free time? Who in the family most easily angers me?"

Children Learn By Example

Do not forget that children learn how to handle disagreements by watching their parents' example. How readily do you and your partner have "good" arguments, which end in successful reconciliation? Or do you stay angry, or avoid fights altogether? Your children model themselves on you.

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