

## The Family That Fights Together

*New Thinking for Parents Since the Days of 'Not in Front of the Children'*



It is a quandary every couple with children eventually faces: Should we fight in front of the kids?

The answer is complicated. Child psychologists who study the issue tend to say yes—if parents can manage to argue in a healthy way. That means disagreeing respectfully and avoiding name-calling, insults, dredging up past infractions or storming off in anger, for starters.

"Kids are going to have disagreements with their friends, their peers, co-workers," says Patrick Davies, a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester. "If they don't witness disagreements and how they are handled in constructive ways, they are not well-equipped to go out into the world and address inevitable conflict."

Dr. Davies and fellow researchers found that "constructive" marital conflict was associated with an increase in children's emotional security, in their study of 235 families with children ages 5 to 7 published in 2009 in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*. Other studies have linked constructive marital conflict with the healthy development of children's problem-solving and coping skills and even happiness.



A growing awareness of how and where to fight with a spouse when kids are involved is being spurred in part by a proliferation of research linking children's exposure to a lot of unhealthy marital conflict—characterized by hostility, threats and insults—with a greater risk of anxiety disorders, depression and behavior problems. Also, a generation of young parents who grew up as kids of divorce in the 1970s and 1980s are now scrutinizing how their parents fought. Some vow to do things differently with their own progeny.

Even infants can be affected by angry disagreements—even when they're asleep. A study published in May in the journal *Psychological Science* took 24 babies from 6- to 12-months-old and exposed them to various tones of voice (very angry, mildly angry, happy and neutral) while they were lying asleep in an fMRI scanner. Those infants in families with higher levels of conflict between spouses had elevated responses in parts of the brain associated with reactions to stress and emotion regulation when exposed to the very angry voices during the study. Babies "are still sensitive to things even when they're asleep," says Alice Graham, a doctoral candidate in psychology at the University of Oregon and lead author of the study. "The idea of it being a time to let loose when infants are asleep is probably not accurate."

Still, beyond universal agreement against physical confrontation, opinions vary on the right approach. Some experts say parents should keep arguments away from children because it's just too hard to fight well. "If [parents] are going to have disagreements, they should do that in private as much as possible," says Thomas McInerney, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics. "It is the rare instance when [couples] can keep it rational and keep it calm."



How to keep things from getting too heated for little eyes and ears? Child psychologist Kirsten Cullen Sharma suggests that parents agree in advance on an anger cutoff point for arguments. On an anger scale of one to 10, she asks individuals to define the number when they feel they start to yell, curse or generally lose control. (For one person, it could be a

five. For another, it could be a seven.) During a disagreement, when Mom or Dad hits the cutoff number, the couple tables the argument to a time when the kids are asleep or aren't around. Either party can say when the other person has reached that limit.

"One of the great skills parents can offer their children is conflict resolution. That helps [kids] in their future relationships," says Dr. Cullen Sharma, co-director of the early childhood clinical service at the Child Study Center at NYU Langone Medical Center.

Caroline Rheinfrank and Chopper Bernet have an unofficial five-minute time limit for disagreements in front of their three children, ages 15, 14 and 11. "Now that they are older, they comprehend more," says Ms. Rheinfrank, a stay-at-home mother in Los Angeles. Or as Mr. Bernet, an actor, explains, "Parents need timeouts, too." The couple also tries to prevent potential blowups by cutting each other extra slack during times with high bicker potential, including while in the car and just before dinner.

Parents should use their kids' reaction during a fight as a guide, experts say. A crying child is an obvious sign to end an argument. But there are more subtle cues that a kid is distressed, Dr. Davies says. "When they start freezing, they are stuck still for a few seconds, that is a really negative sign that they feel like they are in extreme danger," he says. Other kids tend to "slump over, lethargic, and look like they are sort of depressed."

Some kids misbehave to try to distract parents from the conflict. Other children attempt to insert themselves and try to mediate or take sides. All of these are signs that an argument needs to be put on hold, Dr. Davies says.

It is not OK to drag kids into a parental fight or encourage them to take sides, Dr. Cullen Sharma says. And don't be fooled if a teen appears nonchalant about his parents' below-the-belt fighting: "They roll their eyes, but that does not make it less painful," says Alan E. Kazdin, director of the Yale Parenting Center and a professor of psychology and child psychiatry at Yale University.

Making sure kids see some kind of resolution to the argument is crucial, Dr. Kazdin says. "Is there a nice makeup period and mundane chatter? Routine kind of banter will greatly alleviate the child's anxiety," he says. This doesn't mean that the conflict has to be solved. You may just decide to settle it later or agree to disagree. And even more critical, Dr. Kazdin says, is what goes on in the marital relationship during non-conflict times. "The proportion of fighting to affectionate talk is the issue," he says.

Georgi and Rick Silverman have decided not to hide arguments—often about the division of household labor or Mr. Silverman's weekend sports viewing—from their kids, ages 9 and 3. But they also make sure the children see them make up. "We'll hold hands and he'll hug me and we'll say we love each other," says Ms. Silverman, a stay-at-home mother in Houston. "Even if I'm a little upset, I want the kids to know, 'I still love your Mom and I'm not going anywhere,'" says Mr. Silverman, the chief financial officer of a facilities-maintenance business, whose parents divorced when he was 13.

**Bottling up anger and giving a spouse the cold shoulder when the kids are around can end up making things worse. The silent treatment is actually more distressing for kids than a healthy argument, Dr. Davies says. "Kids pick up on that. But they don't know what is going on," he says, adding that children may think the fight—and its potential consequences—are much worse than they actually are.**

**And some topics should be totally off-limits in front of the kids, experts say. Intimate, high-stakes relationship discussions should wait until the kids are out of earshot. So should disagreements about parenting practices like discipline or bedtimes. "Parents should come up with a unified decision and present a united front to the child," Dr. McInerney says.**