

Parents: conflict management

What is conflict?

Conflict can range from small family disagreements to arguments to physical fights. Conflict can also look like uncomfortable silence, anger and hostility. Sometimes you can solve problems that lead to conflict quickly. At other times, it can be hard to work out solutions.

Why is conflict management important?

Conflict is a natural part of relationships, especially as you face the challenges of parenting. When you work together on conflict management, you build happy, healthy relationships and teach your children important life skills.

Conflict is normal in families too. The way it affects children depends on how intense the conflict is, how often it happens, and how you sort it out. Constructive conflict management is important for your children, your relationship and the wellbeing of your entire family.

When conflict is useful

Children are not born knowing how to handle conflict, so occasional arguments probably will not harm them if you handle the arguments well.

In fact, seeing you work together on conflict management teaches your child valuable skills. For example, by working together to sort out differences, you show your child how to negotiate and solve problems effectively. This also teaches your child that difference and conflict are a part of life.

It can also be reassuring for your child when you show optimism that you can work out a problem, and when you explain how you sorted out a disagreement.

When conflict is a problem

Conflict is a problem when parents fight a lot and do not resolve their differences. Unhealthy conflict affects children badly, whether parents are together or separated.

The more parents argue, the more it affects children. Severe and frequent conflict can lead to a higher risk of emotional, behaviour and social problems. Your child is more likely to be disobedient and to experience problems such as depression, aggression or poor performance at school.

Conflict can be particularly harmful if it involves abuse, threats or disputes in front of your child. Physical violence, such as pushing or hitting between couples, can be even more harmful for your child. If your child grows up seeing physical violence she is more likely to have personal and social problems when she grows up.

How children are affected by parental conflict

Some children cope better with conflict than others. Factors such as temperament and age make a difference. Younger children are more likely to show that they are upset. They might show stress by throwing tantrums or behaving in difficult ways. Older children might experience problems such as depression, worries and low self-esteem or confidence.

Gender might play a part in how children cope with conflict. Boys are more likely to feel threatened by their parents' arguments. Boys might respond by acting up, becoming disobedient or aggressive. Girls tend to blame themselves and become withdrawn.

Tips for managing parent conflict

- **Keep it to yourselves.** Avoid arguing in front of your child especially if the discussion is likely to be heated. Make a time to discuss problems when your child is not with you – for example, after her bedtime, or when she's at school or visiting grandparents. Do not feel you have to tell your children what the issue is. Some problems are for grown-up ears only.
- **Let your child see you sorting things out constructively.** Take turns talking and be polite. Try to understand your spouse's feelings or perspective. You do not have to agree, but you can try to understand where your spouse is coming from. Share your feelings with your spouse and listen to their perspective then brainstorm possible solutions together.
- **Keep a good relationship with your children.** Even if you're having problems with your spouse, focus on a positive relationship with your child. Do things that she will enjoy. Tell her when she does things you like. Give her a hug. Whenever you can, stop what you're doing so you can help, listen or talk to your child.
- **Let your child know she's not the problem.** Tell your child that the issues are not about her and that the grown-ups are sorting it out. Let your child know that you are trying to find a solution to the problem. Continue to spend positive time with your child – remind her that you love her and encourage your spouse to keep a positive relationship with her too.



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Recommended Reads

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- [Married to distraction: Restoring intimacy and strengthening your marriage in an age of interruption](#)
- [Calm parents happy kids: The secrets of stress free parenting](#)