

## Don't Settle Children's Arguments--Prolong Them!

By Janet Gonzalez-Mena

As the mother of five and a preschool teacher for a number of years, I used to spend a lot of time trying to get children to stop arguing. Then I discovered I was taking the wrong approach--I needed to help children *finish* their arguments. From then on I began to prolong squabbles, not cut them short. It works. Children learn to talk things through, resolve problems, come up with solutions, and get things out of their system. Best of all, the number of arguments go down as children practice talking to each other. Also, they are less likely to use violence as a means of settling things.

What usually happens when two children are squabbling is that an adult swoops down, anxious to put a lid on it. She makes a judgment based on a quick take of the situation and then issues an order, "Give that toy back to him!" for example.

Direct orders don't solve the problem--they only take the argument out of the children's hands.

Offering gentle solutions usually won't work either. How many times has a disgruntled child settled for an alternative toy? Almost never in my experience.

Usually the adult ends up putting the disputed toy away somewhere and pointing out that neither can play with it because they can't get along. That solution never ends the problem. Minutes later another fight breaks out over a new issue.

*Settling arguments for children doesn't work.*

What I finally learned to do is prolong the argument instead of squelching it. I learned to take a position at the sidelines in order to get the arguing parties to keep talking to each other. I learned to help them express their feelings--not me--to each other.

I learned "sports announcing." The sports announcer, who reports the action, is different from the referee, who is responsible for the rules. Referees continually make judgments; sports announcers just state what they see.

Here's how sports announcing works: The adult approaches two children struggling over a truck and says calmly, "I see you both want it." She listens to what the children say and then repeats what she heard--without judgements, without orders. She just repeats.

If the argument escalates, the adult has to turn referee for a moment and keep them from hurting each other. "No hitting allowed." At the first possible moment, she goes back to sports announcing.

"I see you're both pretty angry."

Eventually they'll either tire of the argument or find a solution. The trick is to get them to talk to each other and keep out of their argument.

Arguments are not always about what they seem. Some are only about getting your attention. Those fizzle out when you remove yourself from the middle and make the children talk to each other. Other arguments are about deep seated matters. Getting children to talk it through can be an important means to resolution and healing.

To prolong arguments takes faith in a positive outcome.

If you know that the argument will be resolved or at least defused, you are more likely to persist. You can acquire that faith by trying this approach and discovering that it works.

Some final words of advice. Remember, if it's not your squabble, keep your feelings out of it but don't leave the scene. You're needed to help the children talk it out instead of fighting. Do what you can to keep the argument going until resolution or boredom is reached. That's the way to handle arguments. It works!

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### **Ten Tips for Negotiating Win-Win Solutions for Parent-Child Conflicts**

1. Actively listen to your child's feelings and desires.
2. Focus on present issues.
3. Avoid blaming and bringing up past offenses.
4. Explain your feelings and desires to your child with I-statements:  
*"I feel angry when you leave your things all over the house because it creates clutter."*
5. Define the problem together in terms of what you each want.
6. Brainstorm options:  
*For young children who cannot brainstorm, take turns thinking of choices.*
7. Avoid evaluating options until all options are listed.
8. Help your child evaluate by asking questions:  
*"What would happen if...?"*
9. Once you agree on a solution, check how it will be implemented:  
*Who, When, Where, How?*
10. Congratulate each other on problem-solving successfully.

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