

## Not In Front of the Children

By Paula M. Siegel

Every couple bickers. What's important is knowing when, where, and how to blow off steam. Whether the issue is working late or taking the clothes to the cleaners, arguing is a part of even the most harmonious marriages, especially at the time when both partners are adjusting to their new roles as parents. Indeed, researchers studying marital satisfaction have found that most couples argue more rather than less during the first demanding years of parenthood.

Most of us don't need to be told why not to argue in front of our children. After raising our voices in the heat of a momentary disagreement, we usually wind up feeling guilty, rebuked by a frightened young face or an angry young voice. Once again we resolve to keep our children's lives unscathed by parental conflict.

But sooner or later, we're at it again. That's inevitable. We can't expect to live in perfect harmony. We can, however, try to understand what parental arguing means to children and learn how to handle the fallout when tempers erupt.

### Loud Voices, Frightened Children

"Arguing affects children differently depending on their ages and temperaments," says Anna Marie Breaux, staff psychologist at the Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh. "Infants and toddlers often don't understand the verbal messages, but the loud voices along with the tension and anger frightens them. Preschoolers and older children are distressed both by the emotional tone and what is being said. While all children are disturbed when their parents argue, the more sensitive a child is, the more acute the distress when emotions run high at home."

Similarly, certain expressions of anger are more disturbing than others. An argument that escalates into an all-out brawl, for instance - with slamming doors, flying objects, and pushing or hitting - is particularly terrifying to children because of the intensity of the anger and the parent's obvious loss of control. Also frightening are the phrases of rage, such as "drop dead," or "I never want to see you again." These words uttered in general frustration or fury may be taken literally by

youngsters not yet toughened by the give and take of the grownup world.

### How Kids React

When children see their parents fighting, they have two basic reactions: fear and anger. We have our own memories of our parents' arguments to remind us how frightening these grownup explosions can be to a child. The fear - in some children even as young as three - is that their parents are not going to stay together, that they'll get angry enough to separate from one another. An outburst of tears is an obvious indication that a child is scared. A less obvious sign is for the child to go quietly to another room during an argument, to be as far as possible from the eye of the storm.

When the child's reaction is anger, it is, at least initially, not directed at anyone; it's simply an emotional reflex. Or sometimes it's a case of imitation. Children see their parents yelling and fighting, so they try the same technique to express their own intense feelings.



### Putting A Lid On It

When one of these reactions occurs, either wrap up the argument quickly, or set it aside for a more private time if a complicated problem is in need of resolution. Both parents should comfort their child as soon as possible so that they're seen as a unit again. For infants, the best remedy is being held and spoken to in reassuring tones. Older children find solace in an explanation of what

caused the disruption as well as a secure place on a parent's lap.

"Some parents feel that talking about the fact that they argued only adds insult to injury," says Beverly Fagot, professor of psychology at the University of Oregon in Eugene, "but the opposite is true. Children really benefit from an explanation. An occasional argument can even be a lesson in resolving differences if it's handled right."

Most three-year-olds understand about being mad and - if they watch "Sesame Street" - about cooperating. Parents can convey the message by saying, for instance, "We were mad for a little while, but we found a way to cooperate that will make both of us happy, and we're not mad anymore."

"All of this is nice to talk about doing, but parents often have a hard time putting these ideas into practice in the heat of the moment," Fagot points out. "One of the toughest parts of parenthood is reminding yourself that you've sometimes got to step back from your own concerns and take care of your child, even though you may not feel like it at the moment. This is particularly true for arguing. Even if the truce is artificial and masks an anger that still needs resolving, the tense quiet will be better for the child than displays of raw anger." Tension takes its toll, she says, but it does not convey the sense of personal hostility that angry words express, and so is less threatening.

Not every mental health expert agrees with Fagot about the merits of quiet tension. Stephen Herman, assistant professor of psychiatry at Cornell University Medical College, likens arguing to a thunderstorm: "It's something short, noisy, and intense that clears the air. Let's say that you are in the middle of a fight about who is making whom late, and your child comes in yelling at you to stop fighting. You angrily dispatch him to his room so you can finish your argument. And you do finish in a few moments. Then, you both can go to your child, apologize for yelling, and explain about arguing," he says. This, he contends, "is much better than choking off the fight at the first sign of distress from the child, only to have the anger linger on for hours in the form of tension between the parents."

Many parents hold onto their anger until the children are asleep, and then renew the conflict with equal, if not greater, fervor. This strategy seems self-defeating since if the noise wakes the children, they are afraid to leave

their beds and end up hearing the whole angry fight anyway. If differences can't be settled peaceably, quarreling partners should find a way to go out for a walk, or if it's a breakfast skirmish, to meet for lunch.

#### Arguing vs. Problem Solving

All of these tactics are useful for the occasional argument. However, if it seems that a day doesn't pass without an argument, a closer look at problem-solving techniques is required.

"Couples sometimes get into the habit of airing their differences rather than finding solutions to their problems," says Fagot, but, she points out, "you don't have to argue to solve your problems. In fact, fighting is a very poor means of reaching a compromise."

For parents who find themselves embroiled in frequent arguments that settle nothing, Fagot suggests writing out grievances and possible solutions. Putting the problems down on paper forces both partners to be clear and to the point, she claims, whereas heated arguments tend to dredge up old grudges and to drag in everything but the kitchen sink.

Another obvious argument against arguing is that it makes its imprint on children, who pattern their behavior after that of their parents. Youngsters who are exposed to a lot of fighting at home, Fagot warns, will show the same kind of hostility when playing with their peers. Rather than ask for a toy, they'll grab it or yell, "Gimme that! I had it first." They're also more likely to shove, push, and pull to get their way. "These kids often act like bullies," says Fagot, "but they're only using the behaviors they see their parents use to get their way."

Even if parents discover the wonders of peaceful problem solving, there will still be moments when one or the other will snap - out of anger, or perhaps fatigue. At those moments, children, too, will erupt. Through experience, everyone learns that fighting has its place, within limits. And, through our own actions, we have to define those limits for our children.