

Protecting Children from Harm and Trauma during Family Conflict

Janine Brissett



This tipsheet was created for parents and other adult care-givers. It explains the impact of family conflict on children, and encourages them to find better ways to resolve their differences.

How does conflict harm children?

- Psychologically: Ongoing and unresolved conflict in the home has a serious impact on children's mental health, well-being and behaviour.
- Physically: The greater the tension in the home, the more likelihood that children will have problems with head-aches, sleeping, eating and other physical symptoms.
- At School: Children's capacity to relax, concentrate and think clearly is affected by tension, chaos and unpredictability at home.
- Parent-Child Relationships: When children are drawn into adult conflict, they often feel guilty, torn apart, and unable to connect with either adult.

Isn't conflict in families normal?

- Having different opinions and priorities in a family is normal, but when the conflict becomes aggressive or hostile both adults and children in the family are hurt from it.
- Research shows that it is the level and intensity of the conflict that will determine how much harm is done, and whether the conflict is resolved or ongoing.
- This is true whether families are living together or apart.

Should we try to hide our conflict from our children?

- If you are not feeling confident you can work through your conflict, it is better to choose a time and place to talk when children are not around.
- From early childhood on, children are usually aware of the level of hostility between their care-givers, whether it occurs in their presence or not.
- Children do best, when their care-givers listen respectfully to each other's differences, and find healthy ways to resolve conflict.
- Children suffer most when the same patterns of angry confrontation, or stone-walling (ongoing withdrawal) are repeated over time and without resolution.

What can I do to protect my child from adult conflict?

- Do everything you can to shield your children from hostile adult behaviour, including yelling, put-downs, mocking remarks, threats, and harsh criticism.
- Don't lean on your children for support, even if s/he seems to be doing well. Get the support you need from other adults.
- Don't allow your child to take sides. Children should not feel the need to align with you in order to gain your approval.
- Learn and practice healthy communication skills with your child's other parent or care-giver.

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- Children can be told that you are having trouble agreeing on things, but don't give lengthy explanation of adult issues.
- Let children know that they are not responsible for adult problems, and reassure them of your love.

Is there a way to fight that won't harm our children?

- Yes. "Fair Fighting" is a term given to the task of working through differences without hostility.
- The focus of Fair Fighting is on working towards a resolution, rather than attacking someone or winning at all costs.
- Each person needs to listen to the other, summarizing what they thought they heard, and checking how accurately they understand what was said.
- Dealing with one issue at a time is better than "building a case" with a list of complaints from the past.
- Limit your conversation to about 30 minutes. If you are unable to resolve the matter in that time, schedule another time to continue.
- State the issue or problem clearly, without personal accusations. eg. "I get concerned when " or "I'd like to talk with you about what happened this morning..... "
- Take turns speaking and listening, without impatient sighs or gestures of frustration.

How can we turn our concerns into solutions?

- After checking that you both feel heard, try brain-storming a few possible solutions.
- Try not to hold on too tightly or defensively to your ideas. You may need to compromise to find a solution that suits both of you.
- Consider solutions that will work for everybody, including your kids.
- Make a plan to try out one of your solutions. If it doesn't work, schedule another time to talk and pick another solution.
- If you are still stuck, seek professional assistance to help you move from concerns or issues to agreements.

Janine Brissett

Family Dispute Resolution Practitioner,
Mediator, and Parenting Coach
(www.aswegrow.com.au)

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www.tgn.anu.edu.au