Protecting Children from Harm and Trauma during Family Conflict
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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.
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 brainstorming 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.

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