

- **Watch your body language.** You escalate hostile feelings when you roll your eyes, cross your arms in front of your body, tap your foot, and so on. Do your best to convey openness with your body.
- **Watch your language.** Use specific words and facts. Stay away from generalities. For example:

*You were an hour late, **not** You're always late  
or I can never count on you.*

## ☀ HOW CAN YOU PREVENT FAMILY CONFLICTS?

Think of situations in your life in which conflicts do not occur. What might be happening in these situations? Chances are, you are practicing one of the following conflict-prevention skills:

- **Address issues before they become problems.** For example, if you know that you need to attend a business dinner next Tuesday evening, talk to your spouse about it now and ask him/her to be home early to feed the kids. Don't wait until the last minute.
- **Be aware of triggers.** For example, your teen's lack of eye contact makes you upset. During a calm moment, talk to him/her about it. Explain that it triggers your anger, and ask him/her to try to look at you when you are having serious discussions. When he/she does, praise the improvement.
- **Have a process for resolving conflicts.** During a calm moment, discuss the process with your family and get agreement on what members should do when there are differing viewpoints.

## ☀ WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Gordon, Thomas. *Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children.* New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000.

Ury, William. *Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation.* New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1993.

### SEE THESE HANDOUTS ON RELATED TOPICS

Assertive Communication  
 Building Your Self-Esteem  
 Building People Skills  
 Developing Your Personal Negotiation Skills  
 Empathy  
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 How to Give Feedback  
 How People Change  
 Impulse Control Disorders  
 Listening Skills  
 Living a Responsible Life  
 Managing Angry Feelings  
 Type A Behavior  
 Work Stress



# Resolving Family Conflicts

## ☀ INTRODUCTION

Every family has conflicts. In some families, differences and conflicts are a serious problem. In others, differences seem to be resolved fairly easily, without resulting in battles or serious arguments.

Think about the kinds of conflicts that happen in your family on a typical day. These might include any of the following:

- **Conflicts over who should do what.** For example, who should do the dishes? Who should be allowed to take the car on Friday night? Who should stay home when the kids are sick?
- **Conflicts about how things should be done.** For example, should homework be done right after school or can it wait until after dinner?



- **Conflicts of personality and style.** Mom thinks teenage son Tom is too bossy with his younger brother. Dad thinks Mom should be more assertive with the car-repair guy, but Mom prefers the soft approach.

### WHAT ARE SOME TYPICAL MISTAKES MADE WHEN DEALING WITH CONFLICT?

Most often, conflict becomes a problem when family members respond in ineffective ways. Here are some examples of nonproductive responses to conflict:

All of these responses to conflict have two things in common: they are nonproductive and destructive.

- **Avoid the conflict.** *If I don't talk about how much the repair cost, maybe he'll forget about it.*
- **Change the subject.** *Yes, I got the car fixed. What a relief! Oh, yes — let me show you Lisa's grades!*
- **React emotionally—become aggressive, abusive, hysterical, or frightening.** *Stop criticizing me! I'm sick of you picking on me! Leave me alone!*
- **Find someone to blame.** *Well, if you wouldn't have waited so long to get it fixed, it wouldn't have cost so much.*
- **Make excuses.** *Lisa's grades are bad because of that horrible teacher. It isn't her fault. The teacher has her completely intimidated.*
- **Let someone else deal with it.** *Carmen, will you ask Amanda to turn the stereo down?*

All of these responses to conflict have two things in common: they are all nonproductive and destructive, some physically. This is why learning to manage conflict is so important.

### HOW DO WE LEARN TO MANAGE CONFLICT?

The skills involved in managing conflict are learned behaviors. None of us is born knowing how to deal with differences of opinion or arguments or turf wars. Some factors that affect how we behave in the face of conflict are the following:

- **Behavior learned in families.** In some families, conflict and confrontation are a communication style. In others, conflict always remains hidden. Whether conflict is out in the open or concealed, the way of dealing with it is usually passed on from one generation to the next, for better or worse.

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- **Behavior learned from role models.** New ways of managing conflict can be learned at any time in life. People who have a teacher or boss who models effective conflict resolution skills are more likely to develop these skills themselves.
- **Status.** People in higher-status positions usually feel freer to engage in conflict and are less likely to avoid confrontation.
- **Unwritten rules.** Some groups (including families) encourage conflict, while others have unwritten rules that conflict is to be contained or avoided.
- **Gender differences.** In general, males are encouraged to be more confrontational than females.

### WHAT ARE THE KEY SKILLS FOR MANAGING CONFLICT?

The following communication skills will help you deal with conflicts in your family:

- **Use I-statements instead of you-statements.** They sound less accusing and place the responsibility for the statement on you. For example:  
*I would like you to empty the dishwasher before you leave, not You need to empty the dishwasher before you leave.*
- **Avoid name-calling and put-downs.** They are inflammatory and only make the other person defensive and angry, thereby escalating the conflict.
- **Soften your tone.** Listen to how you sound. A softer, friendlier tone of voice helps lessen the hostility of your message.

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- **Take a time-out.** Some families have an agreement to make the time-out sign (make a "T" with your hands) when a discussion escalates into an argument. Say, "Let's take a break and cool down, and agree on how long the time-out should be. Then come back when the time is up."
- **Acknowledge the other person's point of view.** It is not necessary to agree. For example:  
*I hear what you are saying or I accept that you think you did the right thing.*