

Bayhealth's Wellness Center at Caesar Rodney

Meeting the needs of
today's adolescents



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Managing Family Conflict

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➤ INTRODUCTION

Every family and relationship 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. Kids learn to deal with conflict in the family and use the same behaviors in their relationships with their peers. Since the family is the primary place where these skills are learned (for better or worse), it is important to model and teach them at home throughout your children's childhood and adolescence.

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Think about the kinds of conflicts that happen in your family on a typical day. These are some common ones:

- ✚ **Disagreeing 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 the kids 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 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:

1. **Avoid the conflict.** "If I don't talk about how much the repair cost, maybe he'll forget about it."
2. **Change the subject.** "Yes, I got the car fixed. What a relief! Oh, yes—let me show you Lisa's grades!"
3. **React emotionally—become aggressive, abusive, hysterical, or frightening.** "Stop criticizing me! I'm sick of you picking on me! Leave me alone!"
4. **Find someone to blame.** "Well, if you wouldn't have waited so long to get it fixed, it wouldn't have cost so much."

5. **Make excuses.** "Lisa's grades are bad because of that horrible teacher. It isn't her fault. The teacher has her completely intimidated."

6. **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: All of them are all nonproductive, and all are 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.

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 of the factors that affect how we behave in the face of conflict are:

- ✚ **Behavior learned in families.** In some families, conflict and confrontation are a communication style. In others, conflict always remains hidden. Whether it is out in the open or concealed, the way of dealing with conflict is usually passed on from one generation to the next, for better or worse.
- ✚ **Behavior learned from role models.** New ways of managing conflict can be learned at any time in life. People who have had a teacher or boss who modeled 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 it 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 conflict in your family:

1. **Use "I" statements instead of "you" statements.** They sound less accusing and place the responsibility for the statement on you. For example:

You escalate hostile feelings when you roll your eyes, cross your arms in front of your body, or tap your foot. Instead, do your best to convey openness with your body.

- "I would like you to empty the dishwasher before you leave," instead of "You need to empty the dishwasher before you leave."
- "I get upset when you come home an hour later than you said you would," instead of "You are late again."

2. **Avoid name-calling and put-downs.** They are inflammatory and only make the other person defensive and angry. This escalates the conflict.

3. **Soften your tone.** Listen to how you sound. A softer, friendlier tone of voice helps lessen the hostility of your message.

4. **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." Agree on how long the time-out should be, and come back when time is up.

5. **Acknowledge the other person's point of view.** For example, "I hear what you are saying" or "I accept that you think you did the right thing." It is not necessary to agree.

6. **Watch your body language.** You escalate hostile feelings when you roll your eyes, cross your arms in front of your body, or tap your foot. Do your best to convey openness with your body.

7. **Watch your language.** Use specific words and facts. Stay away from generalities. For example, "You were an hour late," instead of Dealing with Common Adoption Issues "You're always late" or "I can never count you."

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