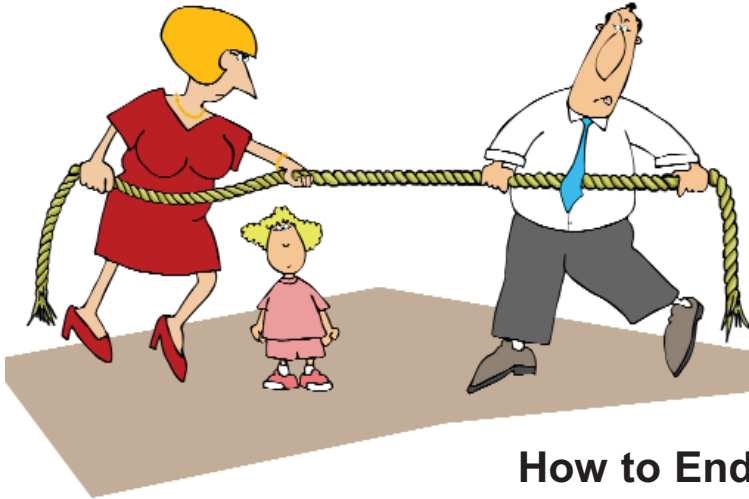


Daily arguments can have long-lasting effects on all members of the family. Has constant arguing and bickering turned your home into a war zone? Have you and your spouse found yourself shouting angrily at each other, with the kids as your audience?

Living in a war zone



How to End the Fights & Conflicts at Home

By John R. Rifkin, Ph.D.

Arguments are a fact of life. It's impossible to eliminate all disagreements, so don't even try. Families are made up of individuals, who will naturally disagree on some things. Every intimate relationship has conflict, and each conflict is an opportunity to build trust and develop the sense of "us" that is needed for success in emotional intimacy. But when these conflicts are not resolved successfully, resentments build, and your home can become a war zone. How should you handle disagreements when the kids are around? Do you hide away and argue in private, or do you sound off in front of the kids? Is it best to let them see that Mom and Dad sometimes say unkind words to each other, or should you let them believe marriage is always blissful harmony?

Effects on Family

Constant, angry arguments at home are a miserable and unacceptable way for people to live. The effects on the family, especially the children involved, become disastrous over time.

Children learn how to handle conflicts and disagreements from their parents. When they see their parents being disrespectful, harsh and cruel to each other, they learn that it's OK to dis-

respect. It teaches them that when you're angry, you can be harsh and say cruel things to people you love. They ultimately learn that the **ONLY** way to disagree is to yell and scream at each other.

Children depend on their parents to teach them many life skills, including how to develop their sense of self, their self esteem, and how to get along with others. Constant, angry arguments send a very confusing message to children. It rocks their world and leaves them fearful. Children may at first be frightened by all the arguing, but as they become older, they tend to get disgusted by it. They may develop a fear of being in the same type of relationship as their parents, and as adults, will likely bail out of relationships early to avoid the same fate, or they may repeat the patterns they learned at home, and be drawn into the same type of troubled relationship.

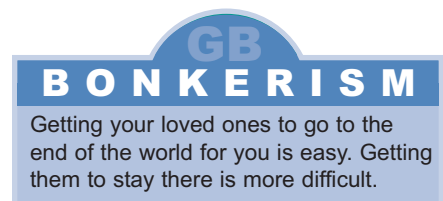
War Zone Triggers

It's very easy to form bad habits about handling disagreements and arguments. If your family has developed this habit over time, you can probably recognize the triggers that cause the disagreements. If the disagreements are habitual, you may even know *when* they are likely to happen, *why* they are likely to

happen, and almost like watching live theatre, you may even be able to predict the part each family member will play.

One of the most troubling times in a family is dinnertime, when everyone is home and hungry and needing nurturing. Dinner time is often called "the witching hour" for this reason. In today's society, where 80% of all families have two working parents, simply having supper together can be a stressful undertaking. And when we are stressed, it's easy to slip into bad habits. When your family is hungry, tired, stressed, and together, nothing good is likely to happen. Weekday evening conflicts can be avoided with some simple planning, like having food prepared ahead of time, and activities planned for each member of the family, until it's time to come together at the table.

Take a piece of paper and write down the triggers that cause disagreements in your family. What are the patterns and habits that your family has



developed? What can be changed to eliminate these triggers?

Is it Ever Ok to Argue in Front of the Kids?

Yes! There is a right time, and a right way, to argue in front of your children. All children old enough to understand language need to start having models of conflict resolution, and this training should start at home. If they don't learn these models, they won't know how to handle conflict correctly.

Of course, there are a few exceptions to this. Don't argue about the kids, in front of the kids. For their own emotional well-being and security, they need to know that the two of you are a united front. The second exception involves appropriateness - never argue heavy sexual issues, or other inappropriate issues in front of the kids.

Types of Conflict

There are two types of conflicts: real conflicts and miscommunication conflicts.

Real conflicts are where two or more people have different wants and/or needs. Many people try to resolve these conflicts by settling and allowing their partner to get what they want, while still holding resentments. This does not work. To resolve real conflicts, you must either compromise or take turns, since all conflict resolution is based on fairness.

Miscommunication conflicts are misunderstandings, but they constitute 80-95% of all conflicts couples have. To resolve these conflicts, take time out before they escalate, and then try to discover where the original miscommunication and injury took place.

The Right Way to Argue

When it is done the right way, arguing can help bring issues out into the open so they can be explored and resolved.

Be respectful. Always treat the other person with respect, without exception.

Be patient. When possible, ask if this is a good time to discuss a problem. If one of you is too angry, then wait a few moments or suggest continuing the discussion later.

Be rational. Don't yell, swear, use sarcasm or call names. Don't bring up a list of faults or sins. Never argue with the goal of hurting someone, especially in front of children. This takes the focus away from the complaint and only serves to upset and attack. Make every attempt to be polite.

Be quiet. Yelling is not arguing, it's abusive. Yelling is trying to force someone to hear you.

Stay focused. Only bring up one problem at a time. Save other problems for a separate discussion. Be very specific about the problem.

Be authentic. Honestly express your view of the problem, including how you feel about it. Be brief. When you're talking, the other person listens.

State your desires. Don't make demands ("I must have..." or "I want..."). Instead, politely state your desires and needs ("I would like...").

Listen openly. Give the other person the opportunity to express. When they're talking, listen without interruption.

Correctly identify. Go back and forth, briefly expressing and listening until you have identified and agreed on what the problem is.

Brainstorm. Be willing to hear and discuss all possible solutions. The purpose of an argument is to find a resolution to a problem.

Compromise. Finding a middle ground is easier after you each have expressed your emotions regarding the conflict. Remember that an argument is not a battle to be won. It is a problem for you to solve with another person.

Avoid blame. Don't waste time discussing who is right and who is wrong. Start sentences with "I," not "You." Say

"I feel upset," rather than "You make me mad."

Avoid exaggeration. Avoid words like "never" and "always." It's unlikely they "never" or "always" do something.


Stop. Do stop the argument if the other party is not being respectful.

Lose Well. Teach your children how to lose graciously. Be a good sport and let go of resentment if you don't get your way. Show your children how to effectively negotiate with someone, and how to still "be friends" when it's over.

When to seek help

Everyone gets angry, but controlling how you express your anger is a matter of self-discipline. Constant arguing is a destructive, learned behavior, and habitual yelling and screaming matches are indicative of poor impulse control.

Changing destructive behavior and patterns is not easy, and takes effort and consistency. Each family member involved should monitor themselves and control their impulse to react angrily. If you cannot control your anger then seek professional help.

Home is supposed to be a refuge, not a war zone. It is the responsibility of the adults to make sure their home stays a safe, nurturing, learning environment for their hearts and their children. 

Dr. John R. Rifkin, Ph.D. is a licensed clinical psychologist practicing in Boulder, Colorado for 30 years. He is the author of *"The Healing Power of Anger: The Unexpected Path to Love and Fulfillment"* and was the host and coproducer of the mental health outreach television show, *"Emotional Success."* He has served on the Board of Directors of the Colorado Psychological Association as well as the Chair of the Committee on Professional Practice. He received the President's Award for Special Service in that capacity. The first chapter of his book as well as an anger styles quiz and many helpful articles can be seen at his web site, www.HealAnger.com.