Conflict Resolution

Conflict is a normal, healthy part of every relationship. If there were no conflict, it would mean that there were no differences of opinion; no independent thinking. It’s normal, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t stressful, particularly between parents and children.

Faced with a conflict, the first thing a parent needs to do is ask themselves where the conflict is coming from. Who actually owns the problem that is causing the conflict? For example, a parent may feel he is in conflict with a child because the child frequently forgets to take her lunch to school. This makes the parent crazy because the parent then has to interrupt his morning to drive to school and deliver the lunch.

Or does he?

Really think through whether permitting your child to experience the logical consequences of his or her actions might not be a better solution. No one starves to death because they missed eating lunch and the child may need to take back the responsibility for whether she takes or does not take her lunch to school. With each area of parent/child conflict, truly think through whether it should even be a source of conflict.

Another common area of family conflict is that between siblings. Some ideas for resolving these conflicts are offered on the other side of this card.

It’s helpful to remember that resolving conflict requires creativity and works the best when you can put some time between the heat of conflict and the problem-solving session. If you have scheduled Family Council Meetings, put “the problem” on the agenda to discuss when all parties are cooler and can think creatively.

Creative Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is effective when you take the emphasis off “me vs. you” and redirect it into we vs. the problem.”

The following technique works equally well, whether the conflict is parent/child or between siblings. Even young children are very creative brainstormers!

1. Schedule a meeting of the parties concerned at a time when everyone has calmed down.
2. Have each person, in turn, explain their feelings. They should not be interrupted during their turn to speak. One person should take notes.

3. The person who too notes should read back what each person has said. Each person should have an opportunity to clarify their position if they feel the need to

4. Invite everyone involved to brainstorm ideas for a solution to the problem. Do not make judgments about whether ideas are good or bad or even possible. For now, just brainstorm and record ideas.

5. As a group go through the list of ideas on by one. Talk about how each of the ideas might or might not work. Thought discussion, find a solutions to the conflict that everyone involved can live with the conclusion will not likely be anyone’s first choice, but it will be something everyone can live with.

6. As a last resort a parent may need to improve a decision but this is always the least effective way to achieve peace.

7. Follow up: schedule a second meeting in a week or two to see if everyone is satisfied with how things are going.

The Family Council

As families grow up, individuals begin to push and pull for their own agenda. This is normal; normal but stressful. It's as if we can all see Paradise Island up ahead, but we each have a different route for getting there. Since family members all share the same boat, this is a problem.

One of the best ways for getting everyone's oar pulling in the same direction is a Family Council. It's a meeting where everyone, even the youngest child, has a voice in solving problems, planning for the future and setting the family's priorities.

It's a democratic process and each person's views must be equally respected. Although some decisions are reserved for parents to make, discussion is always encouraged. For example, if a parent's job has been transferred and the family must move, this will not usually (but not necessarily) be a decision that the family as a whole has made. However, the whole family needs to express their feelings about it and be actively involved in planning the move.

Parents need to be very clear and up front about those areas that are negotiable and those that are not. For example, whether or not household chores are done may not be negotiable, but *when* they are done may be.
The difference between families in turmoil and those where each member thrives is not the presence or absence of problems, but how those problems are handled. The Family Council is a place where each member is heard with respect and the problems of the family are shared and solved by the whole family. Members will learn:

- responsibility as they make choices that the whole family will have to live with.
- courage when they disagree with everyone but speak up anyway.
- how to express themselves in language that doesn't make others defensive.
- that everyone has their own reasons for what they do.
- that some problems take time to resolve.
- how to function in a democracy.

So.....let's get started!

**How to Get Started**

1. Choose a time family members will be able to regularly attend.
2. Invite everyone who lives in your household to attend. If everyone won't come, fine. Start with those who will.
3. Focus the first council meeting on something positive (like holiday plans) and avoid having it turn into a marathon gripe session.

**Ground Rules**

1. Every person has an equal voice - even a very young child will have good ideas.
2. Everyone should share what they think or feel about each issue.
3. Decisions are made by consensus.
4. Record all decisions in the minutes - they will be in effect until the next Family Council.
5. Some decisions are reserved for parents to make, but discussion must always be encouraged.
6. Meetings must be more than problem solving sessions. Also use them to plan fun and set goals.
7. There are two "positions" and these should rotate. The chairperson keeps the discussion on track and makes sure that each person's opinion is heard and considered. The secretary keeps notes about the decisions made and writes them up as minutes.
**Agenda**

1. Compliments - voluntary appreciation for help received or a job well done.
2. Minutes - read last week's
3. Old Business - unfinished topics from last meeting
4. Finances - a good time to hand out allowances or discuss purchases
5. New Business - plan for the future (holidays are always a good topic) and deal with complaints and problems.

Each week, write "Agenda" on a piece of paper, tape it to the fridge and invite everyone to contribute. This is a good way to temporarily "shelve" frustrating problems until they can be dealt with calmly by all members of the family at the next council meeting. As everyone gets used to using the family council as a reliable forum to settle disputes, the amount of time and energy given to chronic arguing will noticeably decrease.

**Problems and Complaints**

1. Ask the person with the complaint to explain the problem. After they've explained it, ask them, "Is this still a problem?"
2. If it is, ask anyone else involved to explain their point of view. Everyone should ask clarifying questions.
3. Brainstorm solutions, with the secretary writing down all ideas. No one should say whether the ideas are good or bad.
4. Through discussion, arrive at a decision that everyone can live with.
5. Put the decision into action - it will stay in effect until at least the next Family Council.
Effective Listening

"Listening" seems such an easy thing to do we usually assume we have a natural-born talent for it. Unfortunately, it just isn't so. Active listening means staying really focused on what someone is saying. It's a skill that doesn't come naturally, but it is easily learned and it works just as well with children as it does with adults.

1. Listen Attentively

- Listen with your full attention. Turn off the television, put down the newspaper and let them know by your actions that they have your full attention.
- Listen with your eyes as well as your ears. Is the person uncomfortable with what they're telling you? Are they relaxed, distressed, excited?
- Keep your own responses to a minimum. Your role is to listen. However, let them know that you're hearing them by using phrases such as "I see", "Uh huh", etc.

2. Acknowledge and Reflect Feelings

- Listen for the feelings being expressed. They tell us what is influencing the speaker. Feelings are clues to "why".
- People are often unaware of their own feelings. Connect their feelings with the issue they're talking about and reflect it back to them.

  Example: "It sounds as if you feel disrespected by the way I talked to you when you came home late."

3. Explore Options and Consequences

If your child has presented a problem, encourage them to think of alternative solutions, then help them weight the consequences of each.

- It's best if they come up with a variety of options themselves. Use encouraging questions like: "What could you do about that?" "What else could you try?" "Do you see any way that it could be done differently?"
- Guide them into exploring the consequences of each option. Use questions like: "What do you think would happen if you did that?" "Do you think that would improve the situation?" "Is that result something you could live with?"
- "That's an option," is a neutral, non-judgmental comment for a parent to make.
Effective Talking

There are some situations when a parent needs to communicate their point of view directly! A technique for doing this effectively is "I" messages. "I" messages work well because they shift the emphasis off blaming the child (which they can argue about), to how the parent feels about the behaviour. "I" messages work best in a firm, but calm tone of voice so if necessary, give yourself some time to cool-off if you are angry. "I" messages work equally as well with children and adults.

How to Deliver an "I" Message

1. **Name the behaviour or situation you want changed.** Aim this statement at the behaviour, not the child or their personality. Start with "When you...." Example: "When you leave the kitchen in a mess...."

2. **Say how you feel about the situation.** People often believe the emotion they are feeling is anger. If they examine the emotion more closely they realize it is usually closer to something else like: fear, hurt, disrespect, worry, etc. Start with "I feel...." Example: "I feel taken advantage of..."

3. **State your reason or the consequences to you.** Everyone wants a reason for changing their behaviour. Give your child a reason. Begin it with "because...." Example: "because then I have to spend my time and energy cleaning up after you."

4. **Say what you want done.** Be explicit. Start with "I would like...." Example: "I would like you to put the food away in the fridge and the dishes in the sink."

"I" Message Complete.... "When you leave the kitchen in a mess, I feel taken advantage of because then I have to spend my time and energy cleaning up after you. I would like you to put the food away in the fridge and the dishes in the sink."

5. **Ask for agreement.** Follow your "I" message with a request for agreement and commitment. Example: "Will you put the food away in the fridge and the dishes in the sink when you make yourself something to eat in the kitchen?"