
Family conflict - how to cope

Conflict can happen when family members have different views or beliefs that clash. Sometimes conflict can occur when people misunderstand each other and jump to the wrong conclusion. Issues of conflict that are not resolved peacefully can lead to arguments and resentment.

It is normal to disagree with each other from time to time. Occasional conflict is part of family life. However, ongoing conflict can be stressful and damaging to relationships. Some people find it difficult to manage their feelings and become intentionally hurtful, aggressive or even violent.

Communicating in a positive way can help reduce conflict so that family members can reach a peaceful resolution. This usually means that everyone agrees to a compromise or agrees to disagree.

Sometimes, strong emotions or the power imbalances that can be present in relationships are difficult to resolve and can only be addressed in a counselling situation.

Common causes of family conflict

It is well recognised that some of the stages a family goes through can cause conflict. These may include:

- Learning to live as a new couple
- Birth of a baby
- Birth of other children
- A child going to school
- A child becoming a young person
- A young person becoming an adult.

Each of these stages can create new and different stresses and potential conflict.

Changes in the family situation can also take a toll on the family and contribute to conflict. This may include events such as:

- Separation or divorce
- Moving to a new house or country
- Travelling long distances to work
- Commuting interstate for work.
- Change in financial circumstances.

The opinions, values and needs of each parent can also change and they may find they are no longer compatible.

Agreeing to negotiate

Usually, our first angry impulse is to push the point that we are right and win the argument at any cost. Finding a peaceful resolution can be difficult, if not impossible, when both parties stubbornly stick to their guns. It helps if everyone decides as a family to try listening to each other and negotiating instead.

Suggestions include:

- Work out if the issue is worth fighting over.

- Try to separate the problem from the person.
- Try to cool off first if you feel too angry to talk calmly.
- Keep in mind that the idea is to resolve the conflict, not win the argument.
- Remember that the other party isn't obliged to always agree with you on everything.
- Define the problem and stick to the topic.
- Respect the other person's point of view by paying attention and listening.
- Talk clearly and reasonably.
- Try to find points of common ground.
- Agree to disagree.

Try to listen

Conflict can escalate when the people involved are too angry to listen to each other. Misunderstandings fuel arguments. Suggestions include:

- Try to stay calm.
- Try to put emotions aside.
- Don't interrupt the other person while they are speaking.
- Actively listen to what they are saying and what they mean.
- Check that you understand them by asking questions.
- Communicate your side of the story clearly and honestly.
- Resist the urge to bring up other unresolved but unrelated issues.

Work as a team

Once both parties understand the views and feelings of the other, you can work out a solution together. Suggestions include:

- Come up with as many possible solutions as you can.
- Be willing to compromise.
- Make sure everyone clearly understands the chosen solution.
- Once the solution is decided on, stick to it.
- Write it down as a 'contract', if necessary.

Professional advice

There are services available to help family members work through difficult issues of conflict. Seek professional advice if you think you need some assistance.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321 Monday to Friday, 8am to 8pm, Saturday, 10am to 4pm www.familyrelationships.gov.au
- Other parents
- Family counsellor

Things to remember

- Conflict can happen when family members have different views or beliefs that clash.
- Peaceful resolution depends on negotiation and respect for the other person's point of view.
- Seek professional advice if you think you need help.

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