



One-minute guide

Reducing parental conflict

What is parent conflict?

Parental Conflict is a pattern of destructive conflict behaviours which put children's mental health and long-term life chances at risk. These behaviours include aggression, non-verbal conflict or 'the silent treatment'. There is also signs of lack of respect and emotional control. This ultimately leads to a lack of resolution.

Support for parents during conflict

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. Evidence shows that parental conflict puts children's mental health and long-term future life chances at risk, regardless of whether the parents are together or separated or are biologically related to the child, such as in blended or foster families.

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.



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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.

Helping families to understand negotiation.

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.



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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

It is important for all practitioners to ensure that they are mindful when dealing with families and quick to identify any signs of abuse. In terms of an emergency or if a crime is suspected practitioners should contact the police to ensure the correct protocols are taken. The safety of the child and family is vital therefore, practitioners need to ensure the best services are offered and correct steps are taken as their safety is paramount.

Where to get help

- Your Doctor
- **Family Lives** - a charity whose aim is to help support parents and carers to deal with all aspects of family life
- **Relate** - highly trained counsellors available to support everyone's relationships during this difficult time. There is support available through live chat and telephone and webcam counselling. Following the government's latest advice on COVID-19, most face-to-face services are temporarily closed. They have also put together some advice and tips for keeping relationships healthy during self-isolation and social distancing.

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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.

Information obtained at: www.familylives.org.uk and <https://reducingparentalconflict.eif.org.uk>