

THE WAR ON ANGER

Many parents are confused about how to handle family conflicts. They don't want to bully their children, but sometimes being punitive seems to be the only way to handle a situation. They may only see two options: Being a strong, authoritarian, "because I say so" parent who is in control, or being a wimpy, permissive parent who always lets their child win.

If your response is to win by force, you cannot hope to reach a peaceful solution. When you inflict your will at the expense of your child's, you are simply being a bully, and although you might win the battle, you will eventually lose the war. If your response is to let your child win (to avoid the battle), you may be creating a little monster that constantly challenges you, making it harder and harder to avoid the battle.

There is a middle ground for handling confrontations. The following eight guidelines are taken from Nancy Samalin's book "Love and Anger; The Parental Dilemma." Following these guidelines may bring relative peace to your household and model accepted effective conflict management skills.

1. EXIT OR WAIT

It is possible to act a little nicer than you feel, but not much. For this reason, the two most important four-letter words to remember when you are angry are *exit* and *wait*. When you are so incensed that you are about to lose control, exiting or calling time out can give you a breather so that you are not at the mercy of your "short madness." Attacks that occur in the heat of anger are usually met with reactive anger.

It is important, when you take time out, that you make it clear that you are exercising self control, not abdicating authority.

2. "I," NOT "YOU"

When your child does something to make you angry, your automatic response may be to make an accusation: "Why are you behaving like such a brat?" "What kind of slob are you – throwing your jacket on the floor?" "You are impossible!"

The message you communicate is that your child is unacceptable, not the action. "You" statements have the ability to wound. "I" statements make the point much more effectively, without damaging a child's self-esteem. When you are angry, it's better to say "I'm mad," not "You're bad." State how you feel, rather than make a declaration about your child's character.

3. STAY IN THE PRESENT

Don't use the incident as a springboard for gloomy forecasts or as an opportunity to dredge up ancient history or futurize ("You'll never amount to anything.") Stick to the present and banish such dire predictions. Avoid lengthy tirades that become an accumulation of other grievances.

4. AVOID PHYSICAL FORCE AND THREATS

If spanking worked, we'd only have to do it once. And when you've won by asserting physical power as a big person over a small person, you've won nothing. Try not to threaten

or punish when you are in the midst of rage. Unreasonable threats, stinging words, and hitting rarely happen when you are calm. You usually end up making threats that are unenforceable and the physical punishments and harsh words are demeaning.

5. STAY SHORT AND TO THE POINT

Beware of long explanations. When a child asks “Why can’t I?” instead of giving him a long lecture that he’s heard many times before, you might ask, “Why do you think?” Or, use humor. “Do you want my two-minute explanation or my twenty-minute explanation?” Kids have endless time to play point-counterpoint, in an effort to wear you down. Don’t be afraid to sound like a broken record, briefly but firmly repeating your instructions. Sometimes one word can communicate everything you want to say: “Walk.” “Door.” “Socks.” “Dishes.”

6. PUT IT IN WRITING.

Writing is good for several reasons – one being that it is a naturally calming activity. It’s hard to maintain rage in the course of getting a piece of paper, finding a pen, sitting down, and forming the words in your head.

7. FOCUS ON THE ESSENTIAL

Are you doing something out of rigidity, or because your parents did it, or because your parents didn’t do it? Are you doing something because that’s the way your friends do it or because your favorite “experts” say to do it that way? Be careful about following advice that is offered as a cure-all. No system is right for everyone. Often the simple question “Will this matter a week from now?” is helpful.

Decide what is and isn’t negotiable when setting rules and limits. Allow children reasonable choices where possible and treat them with respect. By letting your kids know that some rules are negotiable, they’re more inclined to be cooperative about the ones that are not up for discussion. A little freedom goes along way toward fostering responsibility.

8. RESTORE GOOD FEELINGS

Parents and children want and need good feelings to prevail, even when the battles become fierce. Time and distance heal many wounds, and a simple apology can diminish resentment and pave the way for reconciliation. Some parents are afraid to let their children see that they are vulnerable. But it is a good lesson for children to learn. We are all weak sometimes. And we all have regrets. When we put a human face on the job of parenting, and acknowledge our imperfections, it makes it easier for good feelings to be restored.

These eight techniques are not suggested as infallible formulas for handling parental anger. They are merely options that sometimes help to break an angry stalemate or encourage cooperation. And they don’t always work every time. But parents are empowered by the realization that their “bag of tricks” is not empty, and that there are things they can try – solutions that have worked for others that can work for them too.

Adapted from “Love and Anger – The Parental Dilemma” Nancy Samalin with Catherine Whitney, Penguin Books.