



Helping Your Children Resolve Their Conflicts

Excerpt from P.E.T. Participant Workbook

Many parents spend a lot of time and energy trying to resolve their children's arguments and fights for them. Some parents do this quite dutifully, while others, in spite of their reluctance, are skillfully drawn into their children's battles, recruited either to "take sides" or to act as a judge and jury, to decide who is "guilty or innocent" and then mete out the consequences.

Think back for a moment of your own favorite ploys for inducing your parent to take over ownership of your conflicts with a brother or sister. Perhaps you were a "tattle-taler," or a "sympathy-seeker," or one who created a big "scene" to dramatize the great injustice being done to you by your "mean" big brother or "stupid" little sister.

Needless to say, most parents don't like it when their children bicker, argue, and fight. It's no fun being around tension and conflict even if you're not directly and tangibly affected (and most parents aren't when their kids don't get along). More importantly, parents are legitimately concerned about their children's relationships. They want them to like each other and to get along - not become resentful and distant. Unfortunately, many parents act on their care and concern by taking ownership of their children's conflicts. This is bad enough, for as soon as a parent takes sides or agrees to "referee," the conflict invariably gets even more complicated, but, even worse, parents in such a role usually fall victim to the twelve communication roadblocks - especially judging, criticizing, moralizing, and warning. Now instead of two people debating matters of "right and wrong," there is a threesome, and the question of ownership of the problem and the responsibility for resolving it becomes very muddled indeed.

THE CHILDREN IN CONFLICT OWN THEIR OWN RELATIONSHIP

Actually, the only people who can effectively resolve a relationship problem are the people in that relationship. Marriage counselors, for example, never really solve a marital problem for their clients. Only the couple can do that. A principal never resolves a conflict between a teacher and a student. Again, only the two people involved can ultimately work out their relationship problem.

The same is true for families. The key to effective handling of sibling conflicts is for the parent to accurately perceive that the children own their relationship which, at the moment, is in terrible shape, and to use Active Listening (and other assisting skills) as a facilitator, a mediator between the children in conflict.

The parent-facilitator encourages the children to talk directly to each other rather than through the parent. The parent Active Listens and feeds back the content and feelings of each of the children, especially when their words are highly loaded with anger or are obscure. Each child feels accurately heard and also has a chance to hear the other child's real message under any loaded words when they are "decoded" by the parent's Active Listening. When the messages being sent are relatively clear, the parent can simply attend, remain silent, and let the children take responsibility for working out the problem.

BEYOND ACTIVE LISTENING TO METHOD III

When the messages are not clear, as in the case of prolonged anger or silence, a lot of Active Listening is necessary. Sometimes even vigorous Active Listening isn't enough and the parent needs to introduce Method III and offer to guide the children through it. A good deal of confronting may be necessary to resist the children's tendency to either give up (Method II) or solve the problem with a solution imposed by the "rescuing" parent.

Children sometimes arrive at satisfactory solutions without anyone's help, but more often than not this does not happen because the real issues are not uncovered. The antagonists rarely listen to and understand each other (even though a lot of words get exchanged).

There is no process for the defusing of strong feelings, and problem-solving doesn't get organized and underway. Parents who facilitate their children to solve their own problems realize a triple benefit: resolution of the immediate problem between the children, more effective problem-solving skills in the future, and mutual respect within all family relationships.



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