

PREPARE TO FIGHT FAIR

The Clark family was at it again. Mom accused Dad of being rude to her that morning, and Dad denied it. His memory, he claimed, was much more accurate than hers. Mom said he was crazy—if he couldn't even remember to put up the toilet seat, how could he claim to remember the fight?! Dad exploded in anger, and mom said he was acting just like his father. Dad yelled that she was stupid and was ever so clueless.

At that point, twelve-year-old Brady came in for some help with a math problem, and Dad told him to shut up and go to his room. The other son ran for cover.

Nobody won the fight. Mom went to the bedroom and cried. Brady hid in his room. The younger son sat transfixed on the couch, afraid to move. Dad ranted and raved throughout the house. And wounds were inflicted that would last for years.

Communicating in conflict is perhaps the most difficult type of communication possible. In such a tense verbal exchange, it is simply too easy to seek to inflict wounds on family members. As dads, we must remember that not all conflict is bad. It can actually be an opportunity to help our families learn to manage conflict in healthy ways. Preparation is the key. We can utilize times of peace to think through and even visualize healthy ways to help control the emotional explosions often found in family fights. Let me offer several suggestions from the dad I just described.....that would be me:

1. Plan To Be Calm

Establish a routine that will help you remain under control. Agree with your family in advance that it's okay for anyone to take a time out during a family fight. It's that important to stop the escalation of the fight and be calm. Heck, just find healthy ways not to have crazy fights!

When you take a time out, get alone and do all you can to relax. Go for a walk, do exercises, or take deep breaths and say to yourself something like, "Calm down. I'm upset now, but I love her (him, them)." Once you have calmed down, approach your family member and continue your discussion.

2. Speak and Listen Non-defensively.

When you listen or speak without getting defensive, you help defuse your family member's defensiveness, and you reduce the intense emotions in yourself that can make you much more likely to say and do things you'll later regret.

How do you do this? Remain calm and pay close attention to what you're communicating, both verbally and non-verbally. Try to avoid blaming, sarcasm, rolling your eyes, and sounding contemptuous. Listen for what your family member is actually saying, and not what you think she means.

3. Validate Your Family Members

Validation is when you put yourself in your child's shoes and then let him know you understand why he feels the way he does. It's really a simple concept, but it brings very real benefits. He feels welcomed and accepted, the conflict is reduced, and he will be more willing to listen to your perspective as well.

How do you validate? First, you take responsibility. If your daughter is mad because you were late picking her up from school, you can say, "I really made you angry, didn't I?"

Second, apologize. A simple apology validates your family member because it let's him know you consider his gripe to be important and worth respecting. It isn't enough to mumble, "Sorry." When you apologize, you say, in a humble and broken way, "I was wrong, and I am so sorry for what I did."

Third, acknowledge your family member's view. It can be as direct as, "Yes, I know that it upsets you," when your spouse complains about the dirty house. Or it can be as simple as saying, "I see," as you listen to a complaint, or nodding your head and giving verbal validations like, "Mmm Hmm"

4. Don't Argue About What You Said in the Past

Perhaps the most fruitless fights family members can have are over what was said or done in the past. Don't assume your memory is perfect. Admit that you might not remember things as they really happened, and that your family member might be correct. Then move on to what you think or feel about the current matter.

Let's face it—communicating in conflict is never easy. But these four tools can help bring some order to the strong feelings—and the destruction they can cause. Start preparing now for your next family conflict. And start preparing your children. These skills will be an invaluable asset to your children as they grow up, relate to



people, and someday have families of their own. Just remember that words never die. In all things, listen, listen and love, love.