

## Stress, Conflict and Kids



### Key Words

conflict, stress, negotiation, power struggles, self-care (for parents), respect, conflict resolution, violence prevention

If you are a parent, there is a good chance you have more stress in your life than you would like. Although many of us assume that work is the source of most stress, for parents at least, the most frequent source of stress is conflict with their children. Parents report that arguments with children over discipline, homework, or chores account for nearly one quarter of all stressful events — more than all work-related stressors combined. In fact, the stress related to conflicts with children is more than twice as common as any other single source of stress.

Although many parents have learned to breathe deeply and manage their stress, many of us feel drained and worn out after a day of arguments over clothes, snacks, chores, TV, and sibling conflict. One parenting seminar participant told me, *“When I hear my daughter come home, sometimes I go in the bathroom and close the door. I can’t stand the arguments.”* The stress of regular conflict made family life nearly unbearable for this mother. It’s little wonder that parent/child conflict is a leading indicator of overall satisfaction with family life.



Workplace and marital stress often exacerbate the problem. A recent study at Cornell University found that fathers who experience stress at work find themselves more than twice as likely as those who don’t to engage in stressful arguments with their children. And, when parents argue with each other, they are three times more likely to have conflict with their children.

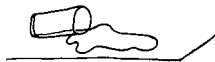
If you have more than an occasional argument with your children, you are likely to be suffering from stress that you would rather do without. If so, you have good reason to be concerned. Current research continues to uncover the harmful effects of stress. Extreme or prolonged stress can damage the heart, weaken the immune system, interrupt reproductive functions, impair memory, and disrupt the development of children. Our common responses to stress — smoking, overeating, drinking to excess — exacerbate the problems. In fact, stress may be a contributor to our epidemic of obesity — a high level of cortisol, a hormone released during prolonged stress, leads to increased fat production in the body.

Although we all know that conflict with our children can be stressful for us, few of us recognize how stressful such conflict can be for our children. Surveys of fifth graders indicate that 87% of ten- and eleven-year-old children are usually angry, upset, or frustrated after an argument with their parents. Meanwhile, only 38% of their parents feel such stressful emotions with the same frequency.

### **What can you do to manage conflicts more effectively with less stress? Negotiate.**

When parents explain and negotiate during conflicts, children feel stressful emotions far less frequently. Unfortunately, many of us respond to conflict with reactions that increase stress.

Nearly all parents say they lose their tempers, yell, or shout at least sometimes during arguments with their children. These reactions lead to more problems — and more stress. Parents who suppress conflicts by yelling, find their children growing increasingly rebellious, angry, and reactive. Their stress bubbles over, perhaps leading to long-term social problems.



How do we avoid reactions that make matters worse? Before you react to the next sibling tiff or spilled glass of milk, check your stress level. If you aren't prepared to handle the situation well, take a few moments to manage yourself before you manage the kids. Science has taught us much about stress and how to manage it effectively. Deep breathing helps rid the body of stress hormones. Regular exercise helps reduce stress and regulate our reactions. Those who get enough sleep are better able to cope than those who don't. Consistent eating patterns and a healthy diet can help avoid irregular blood sugar levels that contribute to stress. Perhaps most important, prepare yourself in advance for the most frequent conflicts, the ones you can expect every week. Once you have a plan for negotiating calmly and effectively, you won't react so negatively.

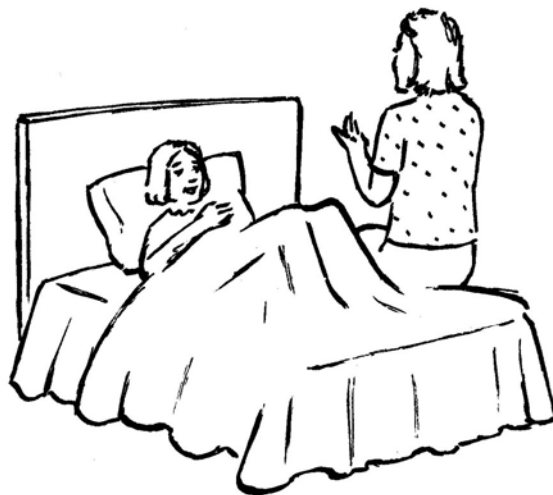
Negotiating with children isn't as crazy as it sounds. When we talk about spouses or business partners who have good working relationships, we usually mean that they can talk their way through their differences. They respect each other. They negotiate life together. Teaching your children to work with you, rather than against you, will bring stronger relationships and a more peaceful home.

*Negotiating doesn't mean giving in.* It means dealing with your emotions before you deal with your children. It means helping your children learn to manage their own emotions and the stress that comes with conflict. It means listening to your kids — a sign of respect that will reduce their anger and a necessary step for working together. It means talking so your kids will learn from you, not close their ears to you. It means working together to find solutions that reflect both your needs and your child's wishes. It means disciplining your child in a way that will help her learn, not make her burn with anger. It does NOT mean negotiating everything

— health, safety and moral issues are responsibilities that parents must keep.

Negotiating with kids, and teaching them to negotiate, works. Schools have found that conflict resolution programs help kids learn to work together, ease the number of conflicts with teachers, and reduce the number of fights in school. In fact, the National Center for Disease Control, found that parenting programs that teach parents how to manage family conflict effectively are among the most promising strategies for easing tensions and reducing violence in schools.

All of us want our children to make their beds, eat their vegetables, and do their homework, but when these issues lead to stressful conflict, we all suffer. Negotiating more effectively with your children won't make these issues disappear, but it may help prevent the harmful consequences of too much stress and bring more peace to your family.



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