

Teaching our children to resolve conflict

Q: *How can we teach our children to resolve conflict in positive ways?*

A: The best way to teach our children anything is by modeling. This is certainly true when it comes to teaching our children to resolve conflict in positive ways. Now that we have said that, you'll understand why we are going to focus more on how *you* resolve conflict. Everyone experiences conflict. Do you know anyone who enjoys conflict? We don't either. Why do we all dread something that is an inevitable part of life? We believe it is because of how we think about conflict.

What is Conflict, Anyway?

Conflict is not screaming and yelling; neither is it pouting or fighting. It does involve disagreement. Most of us don't like it when others disagree with us. Your children are no exception. It's been written that "conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent people who perceive interference from others in achieving their goals." So how do we resolve those inevitable disagreements and give our children an example we want them to emulate?

Three Steps to Resolution

There are many ways to handle disagreements that lead to conflict. We often put on the boxing gloves, run away, pretend it's not happening, give up, or give in. There's a better way to respond. Marlin Thomas suggests three steps that will help us resolve conflicts in a positive way. Remember, as we take

these steps in our own relationships, especially with our children, we are modeling the process our children will most likely follow when resolving their conflicts. Hopefully our model is positive.

First, accept conflict as a normal and natural part of life. We must not run from it or pretend it doesn't happen to us. As we pointed out earlier, conflict is no respecter of persons—it happens to everyone!

Second, engage in direct, two-way dialogue. That means we actively listen to the other person's point of view and invite the other person to listen to our point of view. Paul offers sound advice: "Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand" (Philippians 2:4, *The Message*).

Third, seek a solution that honors and respects all parties involved, not just one. This step may involve compromise; collaboration would be even better. Collaboration occurs when we work together and brainstorm solutions to our disagreement; then there is agreement on one solution that satisfies at least some of the desires of each person.

Five Levels of Conflict

Understanding the varying levels of conflict will help you discern how far along you have regressed in your conflict. The first level admits that we have *a problem to solve*. At this level, individuals talk to each other and information is shared openly and honestly. Feelings are owned, differences are negotiated, and the other person's views are respected. The more conflicts that are resolved at this level the better.

Level two moves from a problem to

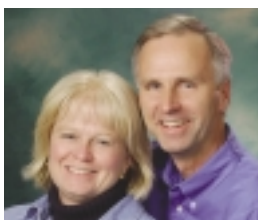
solve to *a definite disagreement*. Individuals begin talking to friends about the problem. The information shared is unclear and incomplete, feelings become guarded, the other person's views are trivialized, and differences are debated.

Level three turns into *a contest to win*. Individuals choose sides and information becomes one-sided. Feelings take on a tense tone, differences are distorted, and the other person's views are rejected. When you reach level three in conflict, you should consider getting outside help. Matthew 18:15-17 provides similar advice.

Levels four and five become brutal. *Individuals hurl threats and warnings at each other*. Information is spiritualized into good and evil with opponents seen as "satans." Feelings continue to be tense. Differences are viewed as absolutes and the one who differs becomes a target. *Other persons' views are attacked with intent to destroy*. Knowing which level of conflict you reach is another important step to resolving the disagreement before it rages out of control.

As we work through our disagreements, so will our children. The way we approach conflict is how our children will approach conflict. We also believe it will be the way we handle conflict in the church. If we fight or fly at home we'll fight or fly at church. Learning to resolve conflicts in a healthy manner benefits everyone—the people having the conflict, our children, and the church we serve.

God desires that we live together in agreement, "being one in spirit and purpose" (Philippians 2:2). Knowing God's desire should provide the motivation you need to work through your disagreements in a positive way. ■



Phil and Bev Haas serve with Lakota Christian Church in West Chester, Ohio, in the areas of education and family life. They are the parents of two children.

Send your questions about family life to Phil and Bev Haas in care of THE LOOKOUT, 8121 Hamilton Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio 45231 (fax 513-931-0950). Letters used for publication may be edited for the sake of space, clarity, or confidentiality. We regret that personal replies are not always possible.