



When mom and dad fight

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

Remember your parents fighting when you were a child? How did it feel? Did you see things getting resolved or were you worried they'd ultimately divorce? How did they make up? Were they ever violent or verbally abusive? Did you feel unsafe, or unloved? If you have no memories of your parents fighting, why not? Was it that they fought in the privacy of their bedroom or was it so painful that you have blocked it out?

These are just a few questions that come up when I see a couple in counseling. How your parents resolved their issues has an impact on how you'll work through issues with your partner. This in turn will have an impact on how your children resolve difficulties when they get into their own relationships. A bad relationship can scar a child for life.

Children need to feel safe and secure to enable them to grow and mature into responsible adults. As parents, our task is to provide this safe haven for our children. Conflict is inevitable; it's the resolution that's important in a well-functioning family. Parents don't always agree; it is acceptable to disagree within the framework of a healthy family. Children need to see that parents can openly and respectfully express their feelings and work together to resolve issues – even if they ultimately agree to disagree – kiss, make up and move on.

I **SOMETIMES** see individuals who barely allow their partner to speak, interrupt constantly and show no hint of respect. Some couples shout back and forth, choosing not to listen to each other, their body language and facial expressions speaking even louder. After a few minutes of acting as a referee, I suggest that what I've just observed likely exemplifies what goes on at home, and sadly, what their children frequently experience.

In couples therapy, I often take on the role of their child's advocate – serving as the hypothetical voice of their child in the room. Rewinding the scene and setting the ground rules for acceptable behavior in my office, the couple learns that my room provides a safe place for sharing feelings, even those that previously may have been uncomfortable to share. Couples can disagree, but must do so respectfully. Each must be able to talk without interruption. Body language is closely monitored and pointed out to the

couple so they can understand how they are being perceived.

My orientation in marriage therapy is very clear: I prefer to help a couple work on solidifying their relationship, rather than work to dissolve it. Sometimes, the latter is inevitable, but even when they cannot stay coupled, if they have children together they are in many ways "stuck" with each other for life. Therefore, for their children's sake, they must ultimately learn to work together.

Parenting can be difficult and children can add further stress for a couple already dealing with limited time, financial resources, and physical and emotional energy. Given that conflict is inevitable, it's crucial to ensure that fighting doesn't become destructive.

Here are some suggestions for helping keep disagreements civil. While they may seem obvious, at a time of heated emotion, it is easy to forget what's really important. Remember that you and your partner are teammates, not opponents!

1. Reach out, take your partner's hand, look them in the eye, smile (even if you don't feel like it) and then begin. Be empathetic. Have your partner begin by telling you his or her side; find a way to listen with an open heart and try to understand their perspective. Don't blame or shame.

2. Speak to your partner with appreciation, respect, caring and kindness, using a soft voice and in the way in which you'd like to be spoken to. Insults, threats or a loud voice will only heat up an argument. Remember, if you are screaming or acting violently, you are out of control, and would do best by stepping away until you calm down.

3. If you need to give yourself time to regain control, determine in advance when you think you'll be able to resume the discussion calmly. The goal isn't to avoid discussion or withdraw indefinitely, but to take the time needed to cool down and then return and re-engage as an active participant in calm discussion. Decide up front if you would like to be engaged in a conversation now, in an attempt to resolve things, or if you want to be "disengaged" for a time. If you choose the latter, decide how long you will interrupt your working at the relationship – 20 minutes, 20 hours, or 20 days. This is your relationship and you must be involved and communicating actively in order to make it better. Recognize that often couples who choose silence or separation are not

working together to make their relationship work. As a lottery commercial put it: "you gotta be in it to win it." It's far more pleasant to "make up" before bed than to go to sleep and wake up angry.

4. Ask yourself how important the disagreement will be in three years and just how important it is now. Most likely it really isn't a big deal. Try to let go of things you can't change and instead focus on how to improve your relationship in the future. If it is a large issue, break it down into smaller, more manageable points of disagreement. You might discover that you agree more than you disagree.

5. Ask your partner what would be, or could be, helpful and see how this can enable you to resolve an area where you feel "stuck." Similarly, let your partner know what he or she could do to be helpful.

WHEN PARENTS fight destructively, their children often develop symptoms such as school, somatic, behavioral and emotional problems while struggling to cover up their own fear, anxiety, anger or confusion. They may regress, become aggressive, withdraw or have difficulties in their own interpersonal relationships. One study, using MRI scans of infants as young as six to 12 months, suggests that "angry tones heard during sleep influence and perhaps sensitize, developing infant brains."

Children need to know that they aren't at fault or responsible for parental fighting, and that they are loved by each parent. Parents should not draw their children into parental disagreements, criticize the other parent in front of, or to, the child, or use the child as a go-between, just because they have difficulties communicating with their partner.

While all couples argue and disagree, when a couple learns to fight fairly, there should be no long-term scars. While many problems are not entirely resolvable, compromise, negotiation and good will toward your partner set the stage for your child's secure development and healthy future relationships.

Make sure to seek professional help if you and your partner are fighting destructively. ■

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