

Fair Fighting

We have written articles on modelling behaviours before but would like to present a different focus in this article.

Sometimes parents worry that their child has become withdrawn, anxious or clingy or alternatively have start acting out or behaving aggressively at school. “What’s going on?” “What’s happening to my child?” we ask. The answer is often a complex one but usually boils down to the child processing or dealing with something that is going on in their life. The first response is to think that this “something” is happening **to** the child, but likely as not, this “something” is going on around them.

It is not correct to assume that children process and deal with new and confusing feelings in the same way as adults do. The classic example is the child who laughs when he/she is in trouble. Doing so can see them labelled rude or disrespectful, yet laughter can definitely be a nervous response to unmanageable and uncomfortable feelings. Being able to express and manage uncomfortable feelings is a skill that needs to be learned, and children learn best from the significant adults in their lives.

How is conflict managed in your home? All healthy relationships experience times when parties don’t see eye to eye and disagreements must be resolved. It can certainly be difficult finding the right balance between protecting our children from conflict and modelling good conflict resolution skills for them.

It can seem that children just don’t hear us when we’re asking them about their day, or to tidy their room or do some homework, yet miraculously when there is an argument happening between Mum and Dad and especially if their name is mentioned, we have their attention 100%. They are all ears. It is unrealistic to suggest that parents should never disagree in front of the children; arguments and disagreements are a natural part of all relationships, and a well handled argument can have a positive impact on children. There are some good lessons children can learn from seeing their parents resolve conflict. They can learn compassion and compromise. They can learn how to use humour and warmth to solve disagreements. Very importantly they learn that people can disagree and still love each other, that it is better to have a right relationship than to always be right, and that having an argument with someone you love is not the end of the world.

However, children need to be protected from nasty, hurtful, aggressive and protracted discord. Make no mistake, children who witness this type of fighting between their parents can suffer serious emotional instability that can stay with them for a lifetime. Exposing children to this type of fighting in the home, exposes them to trauma and is rightly deemed child abuse by many. Children are very sensitive to this type of conflict and it doesn’t have to be loud to be aggressive. Stonewalling and silent treatment can just as powerfully leave children feeling overwhelmed and powerless.

This type of worry is an unfair burden on your children who may even seek to find solutions for you. Frustrated, frightened and confused, children are at risk of becoming anxious, withdrawn, depressed and/or angry. These feelings will pervade their everyday lives; affecting how they interact with others and their ability to learn at

school. It is not enough to send them to their room, telling them it is not to do with them, in the belief they won't hear or fret. Children need to feel safe and secure at home and to believe that their family members are safe and secure too. They need to see that everything will be OK in the relationship; that everything IS OK in the relationship; that the conflict has been resolved and that Mum and Dad are OK with each other.

Children learn what they live. They are learning their interpersonal, arguing and conflict resolution skills from you. If resolving conflict is a difficult issue in your home, for the sake of your children, seek support to find ways to work through this. It is never too late. In fact recognising a need to change, and learning new ways of doing things is excellent modelling for your children.

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