

october @ symbio

upcoming presentations

Sleep in the Toddler and Preschool Years

Wednesday 29 October
7:00-9:00pm

Mid-Peninsula Parents of Multiples
333 Middlefield Road
Menlo Park CA
* members only event

Sleep challenges are very common in the toddler and preschool years. This presentation will cover basic sleep theory and techniques and will address the most frequent pitfalls and stumbling blocks encountered by would-be sleepers. There will be plenty of time for Q&A and to troubleshoot with parents who have hit snags and roadblocks in an established program.



Fighting in Front of Kids ... Harmful or Helpful?

Q: *I need a bit of help with an incident that happened between my wife and I last night. We're the parents of a 3 year-old daughter (with number two on the way) and just completed a cross-country move. Needless to say, stress levels are high and things have been tense between my wife and I. Last night we got into a fight in front of our daughter. Our voices were raised, words were exchanged and it ended with my wife in tears. Throughout this, our daughter was on the sofa watching a video seemingly oblivious. However, this morning she told me I was mean because "you made mommy cry" and that I'm "scary." I felt horrible and didn't know what to say in response. I know you're never supposed to argue in front of your kids – and I think this is a good idea – but what do I do now that it has happened?*

A: The practical wisdom behind your question will stand your daughter and her forthcoming sibling in good stead. Common sense instructs that any guideline containing "always" or "never" is of little value unless it includes a contingency plan for real life. This is one reason that we are not proponents of the "never fight in front your kids" adage. Another is that it is easily construed as a message that all conflict is bad.

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Every intimate partnership involves moments of conflict. This is not only inevitable, but also healthy. Conflict is one of the ways a system grows. This is true regardless of whether the system at hand is a couple, a family or the complex network of desires, talents, anxieties and aspirations that make up each individual. Health is measured more accurately by assessing our way of dealing with conflict rather than our ability to avoid it. And there is plenty of research to establish that desperately avoiding conflict is equally as costly as pugnaciously seeking it out.

Most parents want their children to learn how to deal with conflict in a way that promotes emotional well-being and satisfying relationships. Children learn best by watching and emulating what others do, especially their parents. It follows then, that allowing children to witness healthy conflict between their parents is not only something that does not belong in the “never” category – it’s actually something to strive for.

Of course, to our original point, because you are human, the conflict you model will not always be healthy and so you need a plan for how to handle the times when you make mistakes. We’ll get to that shortly. But, because it is easier to get back on course when you are clear on your bearings, it’s worth it to spend a little time on the subject of healthy conflict first.

Your daughter is undoubtedly familiar with how it feels to be frustrated with, or disappointed by, the people she loves most. These experiences will come to every child naturally. But she will need your guidance to learn how to deal with such emotions in a way that protects relationships and builds self-esteem. If she knows that you and your wife want different things at times, but can see that you are capable of dealing with these experiences in a way that feels safe to her, she will have a much better foundation for understanding how to deal with similar experiences when she is involved in conflict.

In healthy conflict, difficult emotions are expressed in ways that don’t damage the structure of the relationship in which they occur. This doesn’t mean there is not pain involved; it does mean that filter between feelings and behavior is strong enough to allow the people involved in conflict, and those witnessing it, to maintain a feeling of basic safety.

The level of explosive potential in an interpersonal conflict is closely tied to the level of secondary anxiety

around that conflict. In other words, things tend to get out of hand when the anxiety about the conflict itself amplifies the anxiety created by the original point of contention (primary anxiety) to a level that can no longer be contained. Secondary anxiety is much easier to regulate than primary anxiety because it is related to your attitudes toward yourself, your feelings, your partner and to your level of comfort with direct communication. These are all things you can work on over time. When secondary anxiety is lower, the conflict is less charged, and people are more able to regulate other emotions. This leads to less anxiety-producing interaction. And so, the behavioral filter creates a self-reinforcing cycle.

The best way to teach this to your daughter is to model it yourself. If you happen to be a member of the vast majority of us who may feel ill-prepared to act as a role model for healthy conflict, don’t despair. One of the most important elements in developing a less reactive approach to conflict is awareness - the habit of observing yourself, your actions and reactions as though you were watching yourself from a short distance. If you didn’t already have it, your daughter has given you this gift by prompting you to imagine her experience of your behavior.

There are a few key aspects to modeling healthy conflict:

- Be sure your daughter sees and hears you expressing your feelings in a way that does not attack or insult your partner. “I” statements help with this. “I am frustrated,” or “I am impatient,” work better than “You never get it right,” or “You’re taking way too long.”
- Model the essential skill of knowing when to take a time-out. Don’t let the exchange become too heated. If it starts to, address it explicitly rather than trying to mask the intensity in a tone you hope will sound calm. Most kids can feel the tension that’s underneath; and hidden tension is scarier than tension that is acknowledged. Simply saying, “I’m getting too mad to talk about this like I want to,” will both acknowledge the intensity of your emotion and your ability to manage it.
- If one of you needs to leave, say that you are coming back and when. Let your daughter hear you say it to partner, don’t just say it to her. She needs to know you will take care of each other even when you are angry at one another.

- Finally, when you fight in front of her, be sure you make up in front of her. If you come to the end of a fight when she's not around, replay the resolution in front of her. You can tell her directly, "After you went to bed last night we talked some more and we made up." Show her how. Tell her, "We listened to each other and then we hugged," and hug each other as you say this. She will believe your actions more deeply than your words.
- Tell her explicitly that it is okay to disagree and that there are rules for how to do it well. Talk together about what the rules are and acknowledge that following the rules can be hard work. Be open about naming the mistakes you all make. Your daughter will have plenty of material for understanding for what it feels like to lose control and make a bad choice.

Needless to say, your conflicts won't always follow these guidelines. When parents have the sorts of fights in front of their children like the one that prompted your question, the making up process becomes crucial. Understandably, many parents are reluctant to discuss a fight with, or in front of, children once it's over. However, doing just that is your best way to heal any fear or anxiety the fight many have created. It's also the way you let your daughter know that you and your wife are taking care of this: you are thinking about it and you will do what needs to be done, so your daughter doesn't have to make it her job to deal with it.

Some children your daughter's age will enjoy a good conversation. Many others won't sit still for one or won't want to listen, in which case you will need to get

your point across in multiple short references (even if she sits for a long conversation, go back to it more than once) and by letting her overhear and observe you and your wife communicating about it. However, you do it, you want to be sure that the message comes from both of you together and you want to be sure to it contains some essential points: That you both felt bad because you broke the rules of how to disagree well; that just like your daughter does sometimes, you let your frustration get the better of you and you made the wrong choice; that you told each other you were sorry and that you made a plan to do a better job of disagreeing next time; that you helped each other feel better because you love each other. And remember to show her this reconciliation as well as to tell her about it. Let her feel it in your tone, in your body language and in your actions toward one another. If your daughter can see that her parents are not too scared to remember the fight, she will know better that she doesn't need to be scared either. That is how you help her to feel safe again. It is also how you model fixing mistakes when they happen, which is something she will need to know how to do.

Of course, in order to offer your daughter this level of reassurance, you and your wife will need to genuinely attend to repairing the division that the fight caused. For many couples, it's easier to agree to leave loose ends, but the process of mending them makes for a stronger fabric. It is often noted that the stresses of life with young children can tax a marriage – and this is true. The less remarked upon silver lining lies in the fact in doing what it takes to care for your children's need for an environment that is safe and communicative, you will nurture the relationship where it all began.