

# Parental Conflict



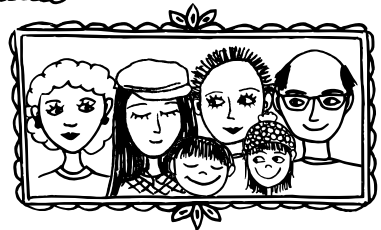
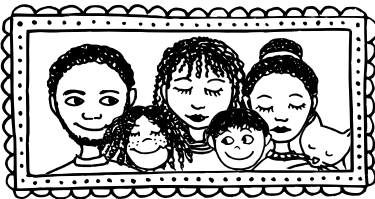
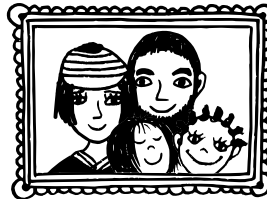
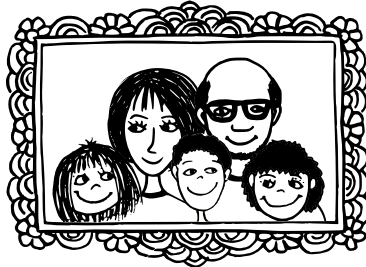
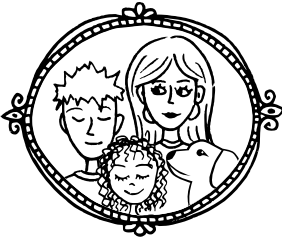
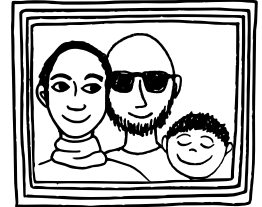
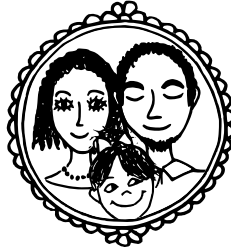
by Nick Young

# Parental Conflict

A stable family is important for every child. Conflict between parents causes families to become unstable and can make children unhappy. It can also have a bad effect on their behaviour, their relationships with their friends and how they do at school. In the long-term this could damage their chances of doing well in life. We know that children who grow up living with parental conflict are at greater risk of being unemployed, suffering from mental health problems and having poor relationships themselves when they are adults.

Of course, it's not just children who suffer. Parents who are in conflict with each other are more likely to have common mental health problems such as stress, anxiety and depression, regardless of whether they are together or separated.

Children who have parents that get on with each other, whether they are together or not, are much more likely to grow into happy and successful adults. This booklet has been written with the aim of helping parents in conflict to focus on improving their relationship for the benefit of themselves and their children. It will look at ways in which parents who live together or are separated can communicate more effectively and is for both mums and dads to help deal with relationship problems together.



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# What is parental conflict?

Parental conflict can mean many things. Often it takes the form of loud, angry arguments. One common feature of parental conflict is each person blaming the other for what's going on. Sometimes the fault lies much more with one person than the other, although it's rare for both people to be completely blameless. Most of the time there are things that both people can change to make things better. However, it's important to remember that abusive behaviour in relationships is never ok and the blame for abuse lies solely with the person doing it, whether they are a man or a woman. Abusive behaviour can take many forms, for example hitting or pushing, name-calling, checking partner's phone or social media, scaring a partner by shouting at them, calling a partner names, punching or smashing objects, threatening to stop child contact or reporting the partner to Social Services, making a partner feel bad about not wanting to have sex, stopping a partner from going out and telling a partner what to wear (among many other things). You'll notice looking at these examples that domestic abuse does not just cover physical violence; it also includes emotional abuse, intimidation, isolation, using children, psychological abuse and sexual abuse.

Conflict occurs in every relationship and can sometimes lead to feelings of anger, even extreme anger, between partners or ex-partners. How we manage our behaviour when we experience these feelings is very important. Children are able (more than we think!) to pick up on tension between parents, which can make them worry. When conflict becomes loud, aggressive arguments children are likely to feel very scared. What makes it worse for them is that the very people who are the ones they look to for comfort when they are frightened are the ones being scary. It can be confusing for small children who can't understand what is going on and are likely to blame themselves for the arguing. If aggressive arguments happen often then children live with these bad feelings much of the time when parents live together. If parents are separated it can cause them to feel very anxious when their parents have contact with each other, for example when they are being collected or dropped off.

Conflict can often lead to feelings of anger. The root cause of anger tends to be the feeling that we have been wronged in some way. When we get angry with somebody else it stops us from looking at their point of view; we think that we are right and they are wrong. Of course, if you have two people who are angry and they each believe they are right this can lead to a cycle that is difficult to break. Learning how to regulate the emotion of anger is really important in resolving conflict. Often it is best to avoid dealing with the issue when you are feeling very angry because the feelings can stop you from listening to the other person properly. It also makes it difficult to get your thoughts together and explain your own views. The following tool, called "Time Out" is a good way to manage anger because it gives you time and space to let the feelings go a bit and think about what you want to say.



# Time Out

Time out is a tool that can be used by anyone when they are worried that they might lose their temper during an argument with their partner. It can be used by one or both partners, although each partner must have their own separate Time Out plan.

It is not just walking away; it is a plan you agree together so you both know where the person taking Time Out will be, how long they will be gone for and a guarantee that they will be back to sort out the problem when they are calm.

## The steps:

1. Find a time that you and your partner can talk together alone and without interruption
2. Explain that you want to make a plan with him/her for when you are feeling angry during an argument to stop it from getting worse.
3. Agree on a word that will let the other person know you are taking a Time Out (just saying Time Out is easiest although I have come across all sorts of words that have been used over the years!).
4. Agree on a place where you will be. This could be walking around the block or going to the park.
5. Agree on how long you will be gone for and commit to sticking to that time limit.

## Key points to remember:

- You can use a Time Out again if you have already used one and things are getting heated again after you get back
- You are committing to talking through the problem respectfully when things have calmed down
- You must not drink alcohol or take drugs while taking a Time Out
- If a person wants to take a Time Out they must not be stopped from leaving.

The Time Out approach means working together to avoid conflict. It is also helpful to agree a set of rules that outline what is and isn't acceptable when you argue. Every couple argues, but how you argue is a huge factor in the happiness of you and your children. With this in mind, here are 10 simple rules we suggest to ensure that when you fight, you fight clean! You can add any you feel would be helpful in your own situation.



# Rules for fighting Clean

- 1. No hitting, pushing, shoving, or any other kind of physical altercations:** There is never an excuse for this kind of behaviour. It is wrong – full-stop.
- 2. No swearing:** Here we mean swearing during an argument, when swearing is more likely to be used aggressively.
- 3. Don't tell the each other to "shut up":** This is actually an aggressive act – give the other person a chance to say their piece. If they are talking over you, be assertive; "Please wait until I've finished".
- 4. Make no awful generalisations about a person's character:** Generalisations are bad (generally!). Avoid saying things like "You always..." or "You never..." - Try to stay focused on the thing that started the argument in the first place.
- 5. You should realise there are actually two arguments going on:** One is a feelings argument and one is an argument over the thing that has triggered the feelings (for example the house being untidy). Sometimes when the feelings part of the argument gets very intense, it's probably best not to stay focused on the trigger and just deal with the feelings part.
- 6. Allow yourself when things get really heated to have a Time Out:** 15 seconds to 15 minutes (whatever you've agreed). No judgments. Just walk away. Calm down. Then get back into it when you can. When we become emotionally flooded, we go into fight or flight mode, and we either retreat, or attack. We lose touch with our sense of humor, and the ability to understand other people. Take time to calm down.
- 7. Don't threaten to leave just to make the other person feel bad:** That's a playing card that will lose its value quickly, and sour the relationship quite a bit.
- 8. Hear what the other person is saying:** Sometimes, especially when fighting, we hear things that are not said. Try not to fight with what you think the other person is thinking – get clarity using Active Listening Skills (we look at this later on).
- 9. Learn how to apologise quickly and in the moment:** Sometimes the wrong thing slips out of your mouth – even when you know you've stepped over the line the temptation is there to just let it ride. Don't; you can't take it back, but a quick apology afterwards re-assures your partner that it was said in the heat of the moment.
- 10. Start difficult conversations with a statement about why you're saying it:** When you have something difficult to say, start with saying why you are saying it. "The reason I'm telling you this is that I care about our relationship, and I love you very much. It might be difficult to hear, but hiding it from you would be more damaging than telling you."



# Aggression, Passivity and Assertiveness

There is a saying that anger is like water; it takes the shape of what it's poured into. In other words, people respond to anger differently, often according to what they've learned from others. It's important to recognise the difference between feeling angry and behaving aggressively as often we see these as the same. Separating the feeling from the behaviour helps us to realise that experiencing anger need not lead to being aggressive; we have a choice.

**AGGRESSION** is one of three ways we can deal with anger and is, by far, the most harmful in terms of negatively affecting children should they witness it. Aggression can express anger in a physical way; hitting things or people, getting in people's faces, staring and other similar behaviours. Aggression is used to "win" an argument or conflict in this way by dominating and intimidating others into submission. Aggression can

also be verbal; shouting at the other person or deliberately saying things to hurt them (for example name-calling). Many people use aggression as their method of expressing anger because it releases tension quickly and easily. It's a very basic way of dealing with frustration that we learned before we were able to express ourselves properly with words; think of a child having a tantrum who punches and kicks and says "I hate you". The ease with which we can let aggression release the tension that comes with anger helps create the illusion that there is no other way to deal with it. Much aggressive behaviour – including all the examples given above – is abusive. If used with a partner or ex-partner this constitutes **domestic abuse**.



**PASSIVITY** is another possible way people typically deal with anger. Passivity means not expressing anger outwardly at all when you feel it. In other words burying your feelings or “biting your tongue”. This method of dealing with anger has some short-term benefits in that anger is not displayed openly by aggressive behaviour; you are able to restrain yourself because of an awareness of the consequences of losing your temper. However, not expressing anger at all -



especially if you feel your anger is justified – can lead to “bottling-up”. When feelings are bottled-up in this way it is usually only a matter of time before it gets too much and an explosion of aggression is triggered, often by something quite small. Sometimes people are passive because they fear confrontation or they think disagreeing with others might make them unpopular; they just go along with what everybody else thinks or wants. This can lead to feelings of low-self esteem or frustration and resentment which again can trigger aggression if left to fester.

The third way to deal with anger is also the healthiest and most effective: **ASSERTIVENESS**. Assertiveness is a way of communicating your own thoughts, feelings and opinions in a way that is respectful of other people and their views. If you are assertive you are able to express anger verbally without aggression; you say it – don’t display it. During conflict you are able to make your points to the other person in a way that does not make them feel intimidated and leaves them open to express their own views – which you are free to agree or disagree with. Listening is a key tool in assertiveness because it is important to understand the other person’s view regardless of whether or not you agree with them. An assertive person is not afraid to say what they think and can stand up for themselves and be firm without crossing the line into aggression. Assertiveness gains respect from others through admiration, not fear.

Whilst assertiveness is the best way to handle conflict it is also arguably the most difficult. Both aggression and passivity are ingrained in us and there are obvious parallels with natural “fight or flight” responses. Assertiveness is more of an acquired skill, but if it’s learned and used it can have a positive impact on our self-esteem and our relationships with others. Over the next few pages we’ll be looking at some basic assertiveness skills that you can try.



# I-Statements

Assertiveness is all about expressing opinions and feelings, even when they are negative. It's important you identify them as your own as this gives others the space to express their own feelings and opinions which may or may not be different to yours. A good way to get into the habit of doing this is by using I-Statements or My-Statements. For example, instead of saying "you're wrong" during a conflict or dispute you could use an I-statement like "I don't think that's right" or "I disagree". It may seem like a small difference but the "you're wrong" statement casts an absolute judgement on the other person's opinion and might make them feel small. Here are some examples of how I-Statements or My-Statements might begin:

**I think....**

**I feel...**

**I don't...**

**I would like...**

**My opinion is...**

**My feelings are...**

**I would like...**

**I feel...**

**I don't...**

**My opinion is...**

**My feelings are...**

**I think...**



Sometimes you may need to initiate a conversation with your partner to bring up something specific that you are unhappy about. You can use the guide below to remember how to structure what you say to make sure you stay assertive. There are five stages:

1. **WHEN.....** Start by giving your partner a simple explanation of what the issue is. It's important here to keep the language neutral. For example you should say "When I'm spoken to like that" as opposed to "When you speak to me like that". Taking the "you" out of it makes it about the behaviour not the person.
2. **I FEEL....** This is all about expressing yourself in a healthy way by expressing negative emotions with words. It's a good idea to take sometime to really think about exactly how the issue makes you feel, being as specific as possible. Having a good "emotional vocabulary" helps here. Remember that anger is a secondary emotion; it is a response to feeling something else such as frustrated, hurt or jealous. Try and look beneath the anger to see what primary emotion is driving it.
3. **BECAUSE....** It's just as important to say why you feel those feelings as it is to express them.
4. **WHAT I'D LIKE TO HAPPEN/CHANGE IS...** It's very important to use "I'd like" as opposed to "What's going to happen is..." or "you will..." Here you are exercising your right to say what you'd like to happen differently. You are being forthright without being aggressive because step five gives space for the other person to have their say.
5. **WHAT DO YOU THINK?** Adding this question into any debate is a really good habit to get into. Here you are using another key component of assertiveness: eliciting the other person's perspective. Remember to listen attentively to the response (the next session will give you some tips on how to do this better).

Take a few moments to think about scenarios or situations where you could've used I-statements and see if you can apply them to this model. The more you practice, the easier and more automatic it becomes.



# Active Listening

As we've seen, listening is a key part of assertiveness. Active Listening is a skill we all need to use in our close relationships. It helps when we talk about the big issues that really matter – the things that can be harmful to relationships if left unresolved.

## What is Active Listening?

Although Active Listening is about making an effort to listen carefully to the other person, it's much more than that. It's about gearing everything towards listening and understanding (but not necessarily agreeing with!) the other's point of view. You are active in the sense that your body language and what you feed back to the person help focus your attention on what they are saying. Here are the key points of Active Listening:

- **Timing is important:** If there is something that you know will distract you – such as the children running around – explain to your partner that you want to give them your full attention but you would find it difficult at this moment. Agree a time to have the talk when you know you be able to fully concentrate.

- **No distractions:** As with the last point this relates to your ability to concentrate. Put the phone away, turn off the TV or any other gadgets that might divert your attention from what's being said.
- **Body Language:** How can you tell if someone isn't listening? How does this make you feel? Make sure your body language tells the other person you are tuned in to what they are saying. Maintain good eye contact and an open posture. Perhaps lean forward a little if you are sitting.
- **Verbal and non-verbal encouragers:** Verbal encouragers can be as easy as saying "yes" when someone is talking. A non-verbal encourager often takes the form of a nod. These simple techniques – that usually occur naturally – indicate that you are listening and encourages the other person to continue talking and expand on what they are saying.
- **Feed-back/Clarification:** Feed back is a great way to demonstrate to the person you are talking to that you have listened. Clarification shows them you have understood (or not!) which, again, encourages them to expand on the point they have made. A good way to get feedback/clarification is by asking an open ended question. These are questions that cannot be answered with yes/no and usually start with how/what/why/when/where. Reflections are a little trickier. These are often summarisations of what the other person has said, for example; "So you feel a little upset about what happened at work today because you were undermined". Alternating between open-ended questions and reflections can often diffuse potentially confrontational situations; you are not putting your own opinions in, you are simply encouraging the other person to express themselves. You are not agreeing with what they're saying. Taking yourself out of the situation in this sense doesn't add fuel to the fire. When using open-ended questions and reflections, try to concentrate on feelings – how they felt/feel as opposed to what happened. This is usually the important stuff.
- **Don't interrupt!** When someone is speaking they may say something that make you want to respond immediately. Fight that urge and keep listening. We can tell when others are simply waiting for their turn to speak.

# Negotiation

The ability to negotiate is vital in dealing with relationship conflict assertively. It is also a skill that can help us in everyday life and is valuable to employers.

## What is negotiation?

Negotiation is a dialogue between people over an issue where conflict exists. The purpose of this dialogue is to achieve an outcome that is beneficial/acceptable to both parties. There are different styles of negotiation, depending on circumstances. For example, if the negotiation occurs between two strangers over a sale there may sometimes be a “me vs you” approach where one person might manipulate an imbalance of power – such as one person needing to buy more than the other needs to sell – to drive as hard a bargain as possible. However, this is not the style of negotiation we should be looking at when we negotiate with our partners in relationships as it can breed resentment and undermine trust.

## Negotiation in intimate relationships

When looking at negotiating with our partners we should always adopt a collaborative approach; not “me vs you” but “us, together”. Because you care about the person, your aim should not be getting your own way, but coming to a settlement that you are both satisfied with. How they feel at the end of the process is just as important as how you feel.

Key principles and techniques of negotiation

- **Have a clear idea of your goal:** Picture your ideal outcome and take this as your starting point.
- **Compromise:** Negotiation is then the process of assessing how much of this ideal outcome you would be willing to sacrifice to achieve a resolution that you are both happy with. Once you have reached the point where you are both happy, this is called a compromise.
- **Listen:** Being a good listener is an important part of effective negotiation. Use your active listening skills to understand as much as possible about your partner’s objectives.

- **Assertiveness:** Don't be afraid to express how you feel. Never cross the line into aggression though; give the other person space to express how they feel.
- **Scaling:** This can be a useful technique in determining how strongly you both feel about the issue. You can explore this through dialogue or simply say "on a scale of one to ten how strongly do you feel about this?" and compare scores. An obvious difference should prompt the partner who feels less strongly about the issue to concede.
- **Win-Win:** Is there perhaps a way you can both achieve what you want? For example, if one of you wants to go to a restaurant and the other to a pub perhaps look for a pub with a sit-down meal service.
- **The Deal:** A simple but effective way of reaching a compromise is to arrange a deal or trade. "If we go to a restaurant this weekend we'll go to the pub next time we go out. Deal?" Of course it's vital that the terms of the deal are stuck to; failure to do so undermines trust which will negatively affect future negotiations.
- **Don't bring up past negotiations:** Keep negotiations on the present matter-at-hand. Past negotiations only have a bearing on the present if a relevant deal was agreed.





# Using children in conflict

As we saw earlier, during angry conflict there is sometimes the temptation to hurt the other person in some way, either physically or emotionally. Doing so is abusive – always. When looking at conflict between intimate partners, or people who used to be intimate partners, we often find that children are used as weapons to inflict emotional hurt or exert control. This is also abusive towards the children themselves and being used in a conflict between parents can wreck childhoods. Here are a few ways that children are commonly used as weapons during parental conflict:

- **Parental Alienation Syndrome.** This is where one parent tries to turn a child against the other parent by constantly saying negative things about them. If done often over a period of time this can stop the child from wanting to see the other parent. This usually happens once couples have split up. Whilst some things that are said about the other parent may be true it is often the case that what is said by the alienating parent is an opinion rather than fact. Sometimes lies are deliberately used to affect how the child sees the other parent.

- Using access to the children to punish or control the other person. Sometimes access to children will be stopped – or threatened to be stopped – by one parent to punish or control the other, for example if they haven't paid maintenance money or have a new partner.
- Using children to spy on the other parent. This often takes the form of asking children questions about whether their mum/dad has a new partner or where they go.
- Hurting the children or harshly punishing them. Sometimes a parent will physically hurt a child to emotionally hurt or control the other parent (forcing them to do things by making them worry that the child will be hurt if they don't).
- Telling children about the conflict. For example telling the children about arguments or details of court proceedings, usually to make the other parent look bad.
- Threatening to take the children away.
- Threatening to call, or calling, Social Services on the other parent: Sometimes concerns might be genuine, sometimes they may be made up or exaggerated, but during parental conflict the motivation for calling Social Services can often be to hurt the other parent or make them look bad.
- Telling the other parent (dad) that the child isn't theirs.

There are many other ways besides these that children can be used as weapons in parental conflict. To reiterate, this behaviour constitutes abuse, not only towards the adult involved in the conflict but the child too. Let's look at an example; a child has parents that are separated and in conflict. He/she sees the parent they don't normally live with (the "non-resident" parent) at weekends. This contact is cancelled at short notice by the non-resident parent, prompting the resident parent to tell the child "your mum/dad doesn't care about you". Here the resident parent is being emotionally abusive towards the child. Even if their genuine opinion it is clearly not in the child's best interests to hear it because they are likely to feel hurt and rejected. The right thing to do is protect their son/daughter from this by fighting the impulse to share their opinion, regardless of how they feel about the non-resident parent. It is absolutely vital that no matter how angry you are with your partner or ex-partner you never use the children in this way or any of the other ways described above. To do so is to risk causing them significant emotional harm and their well-being is far more important than any dispute.

We hope that you found this booklet interesting and helpful. The aim of writing it is to promote positive relationships in families, regardless of whether they are together or separated, to make lives happier and provide children with the best possible start in life.  
Thank you for reading.

For more help and information about parental conflict or domestic abuse please contact [nick.young@bracknell-forest.gov.uk](mailto:nick.young@bracknell-forest.gov.uk)

You can also visit [www.itsneverok.co.uk](http://www.itsneverok.co.uk)



Copies of this booklet may be obtained in large print, Braille, on audio cassette or in other languages. To obtain a copy in an alternative format please telephone 01344 352000.

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