

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLES

Family Conflict: Keeping the Peace

Most of us come to rely on a certain style of responding to the stress of conflict. Factors such as our temperament, past experiences and what's at stake help determine this style. Resolving issues in a family can be influenced by how these different styles work (or do not work!) together. There's no right or wrong approach, but understanding which styles family members favor can help everyone work together better. This can help avoid hurt feelings or ongoing anger.

Controller – takes charge: *“It’s my way or the highway.”*

This style works well:

- When something must be accomplished very quickly, such as in emergencies
- When a difficult or unpopular decision is required
- When self-interests must be protected
- When controller is most qualified to decide an outcome

Beneficial skills and qualities:

- Effective debater
- Assertive about expressing needs and opinions
- Clear about position
- Good at maintaining position

Negative impact of this style:

Win/lose approach may create resentment in others.

Try a different approach? Help the controller understand that they won't lose respect by being open to the possibility of solutions other than their own. Gently remind them that “being right” doesn't necessarily guarantee the most effective outcome. Encourage them to listen.

Accommodator – gives in: *“Fine, have it your way.”*

This style works well:

- When an issue is not highly important
- When there is a need to create good will or build favors
- When not equipped to defend position
- When pushing a point of view will damage the relationship

Beneficial skills and qualities:

- Willing to forgo own needs
- Follows orders
- Values relationships
- Leads with cooperativeness

Negative impact of this style:

Regularly giving in can leave accommodator feeling taken advantage of and undervalued.

Try a different approach? Let the accommodator know that their opinion is valued and necessary. Assure them that how your family feels about one another isn't dependent on complete agreement. Encourage their input.

Avoider – walks away: “Maybe this will all just blow over.”

This style works well:

When an issue has low priority
When emotions are running too high
When time is needed to formulate a plan
When one has little or no power

Beneficial skills and qualities:

Willing to let issues drop
Able to find work-arounds
Good sense of timing

Negative impact of this style:

Leaving an issue unresolved can lead to frustration and confusion.

Try a different approach? Reassure avoiders that conflict is normal and, in the end, getting things resolved will be less stressful. Be sensitive to how difficult conflict is for them, while slowly increasing their involvement in decision-making.

Compromiser– meets halfway: “I’ll give a little if you will.”

This style works well:

When achieving a timely solution is important
When involved parties are on equal footing
When other solutions fail

Beneficial skills and qualities:

Good at negotiation
Able to see the “big picture”
Able to compare and communicate value
Ability to bend, give way

Negative impact of this style:

No one wins, leaving the parties unsatisfied, without increased understanding of the other’s view and, possibly, with a less than optimal solution.

Try a different approach? Push the compromiser to move beyond just meeting halfway. Help them consider the idea that a better solution may be found “off the grid.”

Collaborator – works together to find win-win solution: “Two heads are better than one.”

This style works well:

When there is plenty of time and energy to seek solutions
When the issue is too important to permit compromise
When an ongoing relationship is very important
When exploring or growing in new areas

Beneficial skills and qualities:

Disagree in assertive, nonthreatening manner
Effectively analyze points of view and outcomes
Identify other’s needs
Uses active listening

Negative impact of this style:

Requires time, energy and investment from all parties.

Try a different approach? Collaborators generally are helpful in resolving issues, but reviewing and negotiating every small disagreement may be unnecessary. Give them opportunities to make decisions on their own or ask them to let others decide an outcome on occasion.

References

Foundation Coalition. (2011). What modes do people use to address conflict? Retrieved from <http://www.foundationcoalition.org/home/keycomponents/teams/conflict1d.html>
Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. H. (2009). *Thomas-Kilmann conflict mode instrument*. Retrieved from <http://www.kilmann.com/conflict.html>

DEALING WITH CONFLICT AS DIVORCED PARENTS

Family Conflict: Keeping the Peace

Divorce generally signals a family conflict or issue that couldn't be resolved. Moving forward when there are children involved can be an ongoing challenge. It can be hard to put aside past anger and hurt feelings. It may take extra effort to deal fairly with one another and handle disagreements appropriately. In addition to the general techniques we have covered, some conflict resolution tips, especially for divorced families, include:

Don't use children as go-betweens. You've heard this before, but it bears repeating. It is natural to want to avoid stressful interactions, but using your children to deliver messages from one parent to the other, especially angry messages, is inappropriate and can cause real damage. If you're uncomfortable talking in person or on the phone, you can agree to communicate through text or email.

Focus on why working with your ex is important – the kids. Keep the emphasis on your children, not your relationship. This helps keep the focus on resolving the current issue at hand, not bringing old slights and hurts into every disagreement.

Don't sabotage resolution efforts by withholding information, being inflexible or pushing "hot buttons."

Pick your battles. Divorced families can easily fall into the trap of arguing about every little thing. Giving in on small points can help smooth interactions and give you more emotional "room" to work on bigger issues.

Manners and respect, behaviors that we all want our children to use, can get lost for adults after a divorce. It can be helpful, when conversations heat up, to remind yourself of the Golden Rule – treat others the way you would want to be treated. Or ask yourself, "Would I speak this way to a coworker?" Adjust your responses accordingly. Apologizing shows respect and can be a way to quickly de-escalate an argument.

Agree on rules and discipline. Follow through on consequences. Being consistent can stop arguments from starting. For example, if a child is grounded at one home, they should be grounded at the other.

Remember, your children love you both. You want to be sure to treat each other in ways that allow them to love you both. If conflicts are ongoing and resolutions hard to find, you may need to use a mediator or counselor to help sort out the issues. A call to your EAP can help you figure out the next move.

Reference

HelpGuide.org. (2011). Tips for divorced parents. Retrieved from: http://www.helpguide.org/mental/coparenting_shared_parenting_divorce.html

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IMPROVING CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Family Conflict: Keeping the Peace

Think of a disagreement or argument you had with a family member that you would have liked to have handled differently or better.

1. What caused the conflict? *(Describe the circumstances)*
2. What conflict resolution style(s) did you use? What style did they use?
3. What was effective in the interaction?
4. What was not effective in the interaction?
5. What could you do differently in a similar situation in the future? *(Consider 12 Tips for Fighting Fairly)*

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PARTNER VIOLENCE RESOURCES

Family Conflict: Keeping the Peace

If you or someone you know – a friend, neighbor, family member, or coworker – is in an abusive relationship, help is available.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

For deaf and hard of hearing: TTY: 1-800-787-3224

Offers crisis intervention, information about sources of help and referrals for shelters, programs, social service agencies, legal programs and other helpful organizations.

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

www.ncadv.org

Get information on developing a safety plan. Find national crises organizations and local resources listed by state.

U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women

www.justice.gov/ovw

Offers information on federal laws and links to state and local resources.



Your EAP is also available 24/7 with support and resources.

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TIPS FOR FIGHTING FAIRLY

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Keep these basic rules in mind when disagreements occur in the family. They can help speed conflict resolution and smooth the way to effective problem solving.

Communication:

- › Listen and don't interrupt
- › Use "I" statements, not "you" statements
- › Avoid sarcasm, name-calling, and sensitive topics
- › Watch your tone and body language

Managing Emotions:

- › Resist storing up anger to the point of explosion
- › Plan a good time to discuss the issue
- › Don't be a mind reader
- › Agree to table an issue until later if emotions run too high

Problem-solving:

- › Consider one issue at a time
- › Break down complex problems into small pieces
- › Focus on defeating the problem, not the person
- › Strive for a two-winner bargaining strategy

"Off-Limits" Phrases:

- "Everyone thinks/feels/sees you as..."
- "You make me feel..."
- "You always/you never..."
- "You should..."
- "Why don't you ever..."
- "Why can't you..."

Remember...

- › Keep things in perspective. Is the principle really worth the fight?
- › One negative comment can undo many acts of kindness.
- › Conflict doesn't have to ruin a relationship...when dealt with productively, it can strengthen it!
- › It's okay to take a break when you start to feel overwhelmed.

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