

Published January 2nd, 2013

Family Focus Fair Fighting in Family Relationships

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. She is the author of *Treat Your Partner Like a Dog: How to Breed a Better Relationship* and *Appetite for Life: Inspiring Stories of Recovery from Anorexia, Bulimia, and Compulsive Overeating*.

an unhealthy sign if there isn't occasional conflict. That can signify a lack of caring, an avoidance of important issues, a fear of disagreement, or a build-up of unexpressed rage.

One mother and teen daughter I see have had a tumultuous relationship over the years. Both are headstrong, determined people who have used arguing with each other as a means of forging intimacy. They have difficulty communicating unless they are passionately disagreeing, shouting, and crying. Their behavior builds up to a crescendo that eventually results in remorse, greater understanding and temporary closeness. Some couples practice this unconscious dance as well.

This mother and daughter are learning alternatives to bickering and becoming defensive. A primary goal is to end the mutual name-calling, belittling, blaming, and attacking. They are working hard to undo years of damaging interaction.

Here are some basic communication tools I am encouraging them to use:

- Avoid using categorical terms such as "You always ..." or "You never ..." or for that matter, starting sentences in a blaming way by using the word, you. Of course we're going to get defensive when we feel accused. Nothing will get resolved if both parties feel unfairly treated.

- Using the word, "I" and then putting a feeling afterwards is much easier to listen to: "I worry," "I'm frustrated," or "I'm sad" are some examples. For example, instead of saying, "I'm frustrated that you refuse to do dishes," you could say, "I'm frustrated that I have to do the dishes every night." The more you can stay with "I-messages" throughout your communication, the better.

- Think first before framing your message. It can be difficult to produce an effective message when we are upset. When we take the time to convert some of our feelings to more rational expressions, we will accomplish much more.

- Stay calm. The same principle of taking your time and thinking first applies when responding to an angry, accusatory child. Remember, the person who remains calm has the most control in the conversation. If you yell and scream at your child, he may experience a secret triumph that he is able to upset and frustrate you.

First off, I wish you all a Happy New Year, one that is filled with peace, happiness, fulfillment, and love. Recent tragic events make me especially appreciate our current teachers and school personnel who protect, nurture and give their very best to our children day after day. We all have heavier hearts after the Connecticut tragedy, and fortunately our schools and the media have provided guidance to help us support our children.

It seems more pressing than ever for us to be sure that we, and those around us, raise healthy families. One important component of this involves helping our children deal with their anger. How, if, and when we express our anger and frustration helps determine whether or not our family relationships can be positive and healthy.

Here are some signs that you or a family member may not be handling anger effectively within your family:

- Making mean comments or critical remarks in anger.
- Throwing things, slamming doors, and/or screaming.
- Touching someone in anger.
- Becoming defensive and lashing back at a family member who calmly and respectfully expresses dissatisfaction with you.
- Not expressing your anger and instead keeping it to yourself.

You may want to avoid conflict, or perhaps you don't feel comfortable or entitled to feel the way you do. Or you may not even realize that you are harboring anger. Over time the anger builds up to the point where you finally release it in exaggerated and sometimes harmful ways. Alternatively, you may not give voice to your anger at all. Internalizing your feelings may lead to depression, withdrawal, and low self-esteem.

Managing our anger effectively and fighting fairly involve some pre-planning. Conflicts are bound to arise from time to time in close relationships. As a matter of fact, it's

- Have rules and consequences in place to identify what verbal and physical behaviors you will not tolerate from your child. Then it is easier to detach from an angry child and calmly implement your plan. You have every right to feel angry, outraged, and/or frustrated. The challenge is to manage these feelings so that you don't react spontaneously and irrationally.

Some children and spouses shut down altogether rather than engage in arguments. Some want to avoid conflict, but others withhold as a way of having some control. Some teens become especially adept at withdrawing during a power struggle with a parent. And some parents show so much frustration with their teen's lack of response that they essentially lose the power struggle that they never even intended to have!

If a child refuses to communicate, you will need to get his commitment for a time when he is willing to talk. If he won't talk, you will need to take action: "If you are unwilling to discuss this, then I have no choice but to go ahead and take away your ... (fill in the blank) for two days." By having a plan, you can proceed in a calm, methodical manner.

If a spouse refuses to communicate, seek counseling - as a couple if possible, and individually if he or she refuses to participate. And if you, your child, or spouse is exhibiting anger that is out-of-control, or withdrawal or depression, it is important to get professional help as well.

Reach the reporter at: margieryr@yahoo.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA