

De-Escalating Parent-Child Conflict

By Chandler Scott McMillin

It's a sad fact that in many homes with adolescent children, parents and kids find themselves in a state of war.

It could be a 'hot' conflict with lots of open hostility, or a 'cold' war featuring long periods of stalemate. It's a war nonetheless.

Such ongoing conflicts may begin with a simple dispute where both parties are convinced they're in the right and can't afford to compromise. Often it's over a matter of principle --- the youth's need for autonomy, for instance, versus the parent's need for respect and final decision-making authority.

Somehow they're unable to reach an accord. They argue and argue. Things escalate.

Adults tend to fall back on the traditional 'because we're the parents and this is our home' stance. Kids rely on a variety of counter-arguments. There's the unfair accusation ("you never let me go anywhere"); the false comparison ("Johnny's parents let him do it"), and of course, the non sequitur ("you drink beer, how can you object to me smoking pot?")



Both sides believe fervently in their respective positions. After a few serious battles, the argument isn't really about principles, but about what each side has said or done to the other in the past. This is bad, because now every conflict is in part a reprisal for the last conflict. Battles may coalesce around the most rebellious child and the strongest-willed parent, with others in the family acting as supporters or witnesses.

Denial plays a role. Parents don't like to believe their kids really are starting to hate them. But young people can get every bit as angry as adults, and have far fewer resources for managing their emotions. Wounds inflicted when young can last a long, long time.

“Problem behaviors exist because on some level, they still work.”

It's been observed that the conflicts of adolescence aren't all that different from those of childhood – the child is just bigger and better able to exert his will. It's not difficult to see how what starts small can escalate into something very damaging. That, of course, is what we hope to prevent.

Because when parents and children go to war, neither side can win.

For most families, the solution begins with some new skills – principally, learning how to de-escalate the level of conflict within the home so that rational discussion has a chance to work.



Recognize Anger and Fear

For many families, de-escalation begins with a recognition of the importance of avoiding the **fight/flight** response. We want to learn how to better handle the youth's predictable behavior when angry or frightened.

Four Predictable Behaviors

These vary among individuals, but fall into four main categories: emotional outbursts, threats of violence to person or property, running away and resentful silence.

Emotional outbursts are an extension of the childhood tantrum, and as such are rooted in immaturity. But from a practical standpoint, tantrums have some important secondary benefits. First, they make the kid feel better, temporarily. Second, they can be extremely effective—because as every child knows, parents sometimes give in just to get you to stop making noise.

But if we cave in to the outburst, what lesson does the kid learn? To do it again the next time he wants something. Not a lesson any parent wants to see learned.

So the challenge is how to respond to the outburst without giving in.

There are several good strategies. All involve waiting out the tantrum without responding. One is to simply leave the room as soon as it begins. If that isn't viable, time the tantrum to see how long it continues. If you're not participating, it's usually not long.

Once the outburst is over, remind the youth that the way to resolve problems is through discussion, not yelling. To get his way, he must control his anger.

Parents sometimes see this as a defeat: "he should be punished for speaking to his mother like that." But if the incident ends with a discussion rather than another argument, then I call that a victory.

Refusing to respond to outbursts has three practical benefits:

- » First, it illustrates a better way to solve problems.
- » Second, no new fuel has been added to the child's resentments.
- » Third, you've begun to establish a precedent that anger doesn't win the day, it ends the discussion.

Verbal abuse: We all have a 'button' that gets pushed, hard, when youth curse, insult, or use invectives at us.

Being a parent demands respect, so some kids quickly learn to provoke their parents with disrespect.

If you lose your temper, the kid 'wins' —you're no more in control than they are.

Try disciplining yourself to ignore the language and focus on the issue. That's a signal to the angry child that your buttons are no longer available for pushing.

Avoiding Fight/Flight

Try To Avoid	Instead, Try:
<i>Making accusations:</i> Doesn't matter if we're in the right – accuse someone of something, and we leave them little choice but to go on the defensive. The more damaging the accusation, the more vigorous the defense. Plus we've taken on the burden of proof. If we can't prove it to the kid's satisfaction, he's entitled to feel he won the argument.	<i>Point out contradictions:</i> A counseling technique. "You said you wanted to do A, Peter, but instead you wound up doing B. How did that happen?" The idea is to put the youth in the position of having to explain his decisions rationally.
<i>Personal criticism:</i> In particular, avoid unfair generalizations, the ones usually prefaced with 'you always' or 'you never'. The adolescent need only point out an exception.	<i>Offer to help:</i> It's OK to offer assistance to an adolescent facing a difficult task. Even if he turns down the help, you've made your point – you're not his enemy.
<i>Unhelpful comparisons with siblings or friends:</i> This just feeds rivalry and jealousy.	<i>Clarify your message:</i> When tempers are hot, the main issue often gets lost. Remind the youth what is important to you and what your goals are.

When confronting about problem behavior, try not to activate that fight/flight response.

Aggression: Physical aggression is a very dangerous behavior that tends to spread in the home like a virus. Draw a hard boundary around violence. Physical aggression must be considered unacceptable, from either side. Because a parent who resorts to violence to get his way is giving tacit permission to the youth to do exactly the same thing in future.

And that's not a lesson we want any adolescent to learn.

Property damage is another 'button' for parents. Handle intentional damage through a system of consequences. Repayment, for example.

Isolating is a favorite of kids who don't enjoy the family's company all that much anyway. Cell phones and music make this popular. But all kids emerge from their rooms eventually. Better to tolerate a little isolation than provoke a conflict over the kid's right to be alone.

Continue to make an attempt to include the adolescent in family activities. But don't beg. Wait for the mood to pass. "When you're ready..."

The problem behaviors we've been discussing exist because on some level, they still work. Meaning they achieve a desired end. Our goal is to show the youth another way to problem-solve.

Try a Written Contract

Written contracts with your adolescent are a useful way to de-escalate conflict. They provide reinforcement for desired behavior, and consequences for the undesirable. But contracts have to be set up properly. Before you sit down with your kid, do the following.

Step One: Ask yourself, what does my kid want from me? Sit back and imagine what he might say if you simply went to him and asked. In his own words, preferably. You probably have an idea because he's already told you. And more than once.

Step Two: Ask yourself, what do I want from my kid? It helps to divide this into three broad categories.

1. Things you believe you absolutely must have;
2. Things you would really like to have but could live without if necessary; and
3. Things you don't feel all that strongly about and might be willing to concede.

The key to any successful contingency contract comes down to sticking to its conditions.

An example of the first type might be: *'no more physical altercations or threats with your brothers and sisters.'* The second type: passing grades in all subjects in school next semester. The third type: be home without delay after school every afternoon.

All successful negotiations depend on two outcomes, whether you're dealing with your 15 year old, or mediating a border dispute in the Middle East. First, you mustn't give up something you can't afford to lose. And second, you must be willing to make some concessions elsewhere.

That's the road to the legendary 'win-win' outcome.

If your kid wants something from you, and it's something you could, in the right circumstances, afford to concede, you've identified a bargaining chip that can be traded for something else that's important to you. The more your kid wants something, the more he's willing to do to get it.

Once an agreement is negotiated, put it in writing. That formalizes a commitment in which:

- » The terms are clear. Both sides can consult the original agreement when questions come up.
- » There's a time frame.
- » All involved are responsible for enforcing it.

Contracts about behavior work best when they're specific. For instance, 'improve school attendance' is vague, while 'no more than two absences next term' is not. From the kid's perspective, a statement like 'consider increasing your allowance if grades improve' is not as impressive as 'increase weekly allowance by such and such percent if attendance perfect and all courses passed next grading period.'

Make targets achievable. The point isn't to set the bar so high the kid will likely fail.

But the key to any successful contingency contract comes down to sticking to its conditions. When rewards are due, they're provided. When consequences are needed, they're enforced.



Parent-child conflict is pretty much inevitable—but it doesn't have to be destructive. Keeping conflict from escalating is the first step to using it as an opportunity to build communication.