

Families at



Arguments happen in most British households not once but several times each day, according to new research. But what effect does this have on children?

Dr Nicola Davies reports

Minor discord or explosive spat, quiet quarrel or wrenching wrangle – most UK households have at least four arguments each week, according to new research. Many stem from trivial grievances – washing-up, television, what to have for dinner, walking the dog, and who left the lights on.

Arguments seem to be part of the furniture in modern western households. So if we have to live with them, how can we minimise their impact on family life? This is a crucial

issue for parents. Is it worse for children when conflict between parents is a prolonged, simmering silence and brooding tension, or when there is open warfare?

Painful confrontations

According to Dr Mark Cummings of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, USA, it isn't arguments that do damage, but how they are resolved.

Dr Cummings' research demonstrates that a child's sense of security about his parents' relationship is much more significant than any argument. He followed more than 200 families with

six-year-olds for a year, looking at how parents resolved conflict and measuring the resulting distress reactions and negative thought patterns in the children. He found that, if differences between parents were resolved, children did not suffer a negative impact. But when they weren't resolved, depression, anxiety or behavioural problems often followed.

Many parents don't realise just how sensitive children are to arguments, says Dr Cummings. This sensitivity begins at a very early age – from a child's first year, if not earlier. Dr Cummings describes children as 'emotional Geiger counters'.

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'If parents really resolve things, children will know it,' he explains. 'If they don't, children will know that, too.'

Healthy arguments

Child and adolescent psychologist, Dr Nancy Cahir agrees: 'A common misconception is that as long as parents don't hit their kids, everything is fine,' she says. 'But sometimes the conflict between parents can be just as damaging as physical abuse. If a child is constantly hearing arguments that don't get resolved, he will have difficulties with attachment, adjustment, and basic trust of other people.'

Everyone argues – it's a healthy part of life. The arguments that hurt children, however, have several key characteristics: defensiveness, personal insults, hostility, stonewalling, and physical aggression. These characteristics, separately or combined, can all be severely damaging to a child's emotional well-being.

Exchanges that don't hurt children, and which might even prove helpful to them, contain constructive elements such as problem-solving, compromise, the expression of positive feelings and verbal expressions of affection. An occasional disagreement or heated

negotiation during which you treat each other with respect and move into problem-solving, is actually a good thing for children, according to Dr Carol Lindquist, psychologist and author of *Happily Married with Kids*.

Arguments in which the same points are repeated over and over, or where parents resort to name-calling have no benefit for children. All that is happening is that resentments are being expressed, but problems are not being solved. 'If you bully one another, your kids learn to bully too,' says Dr Lindquist. The bottom line is that children model behaviour on ►

- ◀ parents, including how they deal with and resolve conflicts.

When children see fighting between their parents spiral out of control they're on shaky ground – they feel vulnerable and uncertain about their parents' ability to protect them. This can cause a child to become anxious and depressed with low self-esteem. When arguments happen, attention is shifted away from the children, depriving them of parenting during crucial times. The end result is that children can become reluctant to approach their parents when they need them the most.

Long term impact

Young children often don't understand the reasons behind their parents' squabbling and tend to believe the fights are their fault. They will link it to something they have done as they search for an explanation. The belief that they might be responsible for their parents' conflicts could place a heavy burden of guilt and shame on a child and lead to self-hatred.

According to Helene Cilliers, mother of four, unresolved arguments 'lead to children losing respect for their parents and losing faith in verbal communication as a vehicle to solve problems.' Clinical psychologist Lynn Stoker agrees, explaining that chronic conflicts can also make children believe they have to side with one of their parents. 'They might feel a need to protect the one perceived to be the victim,' she explains.

If you must argue!

1. When you row, try to imagine the neighbours can hear you – so no name-calling, foul language or raised voices.
2. Make direct eye contact and do nothing else while the other person is talking. Appear engaged and repeat what they have just said using as many of the same words you can.
3. Empathise with your spouse – let them know you understand they are upset and ask if there is anything else they would like to share with you.
4. Move to a calmer, more neutral location.
5. Call time-out when your emotions get the better of you and you or your partner get carried away – but agree to talk later.

Dr John Jacobs, author of *All You Need is Love – and other lies about marriage*, says: 'Children start by being frightened by their parents arguing, but later they become disgusted. They wonder how they can live like that. Eventually, they develop a fear of being similarly trapped, and as adults may have the tendency to bail out of relationships early.' While much is made of the damage caused by divorce, Jacobs stresses: 'The damage is even worse for children whose parents stay in unhappy, bitter, explosive marriages.'

Resolving conflict

Divorce or no divorce, what can parents do when they embark on a whopper of an argument that keeps folding back on itself? Again, it's not the argument that's harmful, but rather how those

conflicts are handled and resolved.

Dr Cahir, who believes much of the harm caused by parental conflict can be undone, says communication is the key. 'Parents can get family or couples therapy to help them learn better ways to communicate,' she says. 'By doing so, children learn a valuable lesson in how to handle conflict. If parents can learn to control anger and not to blame the other, their behaviour becomes a model the child can learn from.'

Outside of the therapy room, Dr Cummings advises that parents should work towards a resolution and be clear about it when one has been achieved. 'If parents go behind closed doors and come out genuinely looking like they have resolved the conflict, children will see it as resolved,' he says. If you want to take this further, you can also explain to your child how the situation was resolved behind closed doors.

This doesn't mean that all arguments are appropriate for children to witness. Sometimes they need to be shielded from really difficult fights that they wouldn't understand. If there is no way around your child witnessing a bad argument, Dr Lindquist believes you could do worse than sweeping it under the rug.

'Apologise to them and reassure them that you love each other,' she suggests. Even better would be to deliver this apology together – showing your children a united parenting front that reassures them that the family unit remains safe.

'She cries and holds her ears'

Sarah Mercer, mother of three-year old Tegan, says: 'Tegan hates conflict, she cries and holds her ears whenever voices are raised. If there's a big debate going on, she follows her older sister and they both stomp up the stairs and slam doors to remind us all they are present and listening. It helps if I sit down with two cuddly toys and an object (it could be a car or train set), and explain that both the cuddly toys want the object at once – and that is why they are shouting. She seems a lot happier and calmer afterwards.'



