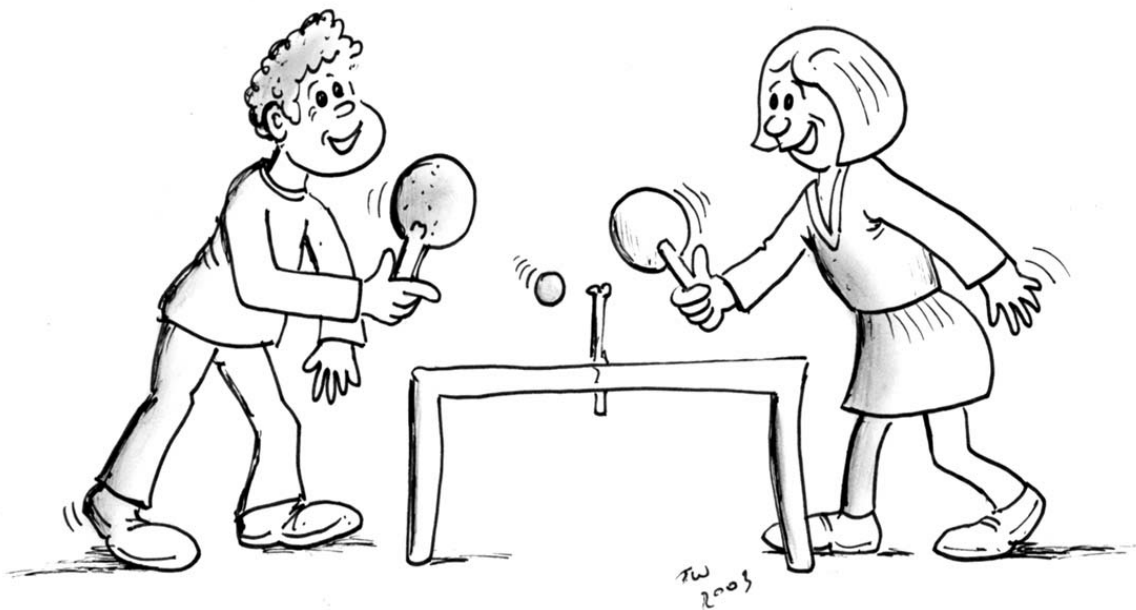


Helping children when they fight and argue

A guide for parents



West Lothian Child and Adolescent
Mental Health Services
(CAMHS)

Introduction

It is quite normal for children to argue and fight. Arguing is **not** a sign of an unhappy relationship. Insisting and expecting your children to get on well together all the time can have the opposite effect. Children will learn through disagreements how to stand up for themselves, express feelings and solve arguments. If parents often intervene to stop arguments, children won't learn these important lessons.

Parents only need to get involved if the arguments become excessive or destructive. **Never** allow physical fights. If anger or fighting is a problem for your children, **you** need to take the lead in showing them how to stay calm. Hitting is sometimes the only option that a child can think of to solve an argument. Adults have to teach them other ways to sort out their disagreements.

Arguing

- Children learn by example, so try not to argue when they are in the house. Remember they can hear you even if they are in bed or in another room
- Teach children how to argue without being rude. Encourage them to state what they mean and listen to others' points of view. They need to learn that it is OK to "agree to disagree"
- Praise and reward children when they can solve an argument successfully, without fighting. If they have watched you argue over an issue with another adult, without losing control or becoming abusive, they are much more likely to copy this themselves
- Do not allow one child to wind the other up or provoke them into losing their temper.

Siblings

Remember:

- Fighting is normal amongst brothers and sisters. Accept that they can't get on all the time

- Younger children frequently taunt an older brother or sister who may then get the blame for the fight. Deal with the real culprit and be wary of the child who invents stories to get the other into trouble
- Be consistent. The strategy you choose should be used every time and everywhere
- Do not ignore an argument one day and get angry about it the next, because of the way you are feeling or because there are visitors.

Ways to avoid some arguments:

- It can be helpful to identify “quarrel free zones” where arguments are not allowed, e.g. on the bus. This is also a very useful rule for adults to follow
- Everybody should be entitled to an area where they will not be pestered. Bedrooms, or their part of a shared room, are private
- It is helpful to agree this beforehand and agree that privacy and personal space should be respected
- A good way to do this is to set up contracts, e.g. ask before borrowing things and do not go into another person’s room without asking. Also, agree in advance what will happen if someone breaks the contract.

When arguments begin:

- Ignore minor squabbles
- Do not immediately intervene if an argument breaks out
- If your children cannot sort it out by themselves, first help them work out what the problem is and help them look for possible solutions

- It may be necessary to suggest some possible solutions, e.g. if they are arguing over a toy, suggest they have five “goes” each with it.

After it is all over:

- When everyone is calm, discuss the argument or fight. Help each child to talk about how they felt. Talking about it can help them express anger in a better way.

Physical aggression

General points:

- Think ahead. Try to be prepared for dangerous situations that might lead to children fighting with each other, before they happen
- It is important that children are not seeing other people being physically aggressive. Separate them from friends who fight and make sure no adult ever uses violence. If you suspect they copy violent behaviour they see on TV, limit or stop them from watching such programmes.

When fighting happens:

- Separate children, if necessary, to avoid them hurting each other. You should try to be fair, e.g. send them both to their rooms, instead of just one, until they are calm. A few minutes may be enough
- Use appropriate consequences, e.g. if they deliberately break a toy, do not replace it and, if they argue over TV, switch it off until they can agree what to watch
- Allow children, and yourself, time to “cool down” after a fight before discussing what went wrong and how to avoid it in the future.

Things NOT to do:

- Never use retribution, e.g. “an eye for an eye.” For example, if Jamie breaks Robbie’s car, Robbie should not be told to break Jamie’s car “to see how it feels.” However, Jamie should replace Robbie’s toy from his pocket money or give him a car of his own
- Never tell a child to hit back.

What to avoid

Firstly:

- If you make older children take on too much responsibility for looking after their younger siblings, they are likely to become resentful and angry. This may cause more fights
- Do not get involved in minor squabbles
- Do not immediately judge who is to blame - you may be wrong, e.g. do not blame the older child when a fight occurs as younger children are just as capable of starting fights
- Allow each child the opportunity to put across their point of view.

During the fight:

- Do not get angry and shout
- Do not smack
- Do not demand to know who started the fight or why
- It is not helpful to accuse them of always fighting
- Try not to let them know that their arguments upset you, e.g. do not say “you are giving me a headache” or “you will be the death of me.”

Finally...

Arguing is a normal part of growing up and, in fact, teaches children important skills. We cannot expect children to get on all the time. If you ignore minor fights and encourage children to solve arguments themselves in a calm sensible way, you will find they will get better and better at solving arguments before they get out of control.



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