



### **The Early Years: Managing Family Conflict**

Children learn important early lessons from their families about how to get along with others, how to handle conflict, and how to manage their anger. When children see their parents and family members deal with disagreements in *constructive* ways—sharing and discussing their viewpoints and resolving their problems—they are more likely to handle disagreements with friends constructively. When children see their parents and family members deal with disagreements *destructively*—using verbal or physical aggression, showing disrespect, or withdrawing from one another—they are more likely to handle disagreements with friends in destructive ways. By setting a good example, you help your child learn to handle anger and other strong emotions. Here are some ideas that have helped other parents handle anger and stress at home:

- *Creating a safe environment.* Young children are less likely to feel frustrated or angry when they have a dependable routine and feel safe. Parents can encourage regular mealtimes, playtimes, family activities, and sleep times that are supervised by caring adults who do not allow “hitting or hurting.” When parents know about potential changes in the routine, they can inform and reassure the child, in advance, so he or she will continue to feel secure.
- *Switching the activity.* A child who has been involved in a quiet activity for a long time may need to burn off some energy by taking a walk outside. On the other hand, a child who has been playing actively for a long time may be tired or “wound up” and would benefit from a snack or quiet time. Sometimes minor changes in activities can help children feel better and relieve stress.
- *Using words.* Young children often do not know how to identify their strong feelings. When parents see that their child is having difficulty finding a way to express feelings, the parent can help the child find a way to say how he feels: *You look sad right now. Maybe it is because your cousin couldn't play today?*

Brothers and sisters also informally teach each other about how to handle conflict and how to compromise and cooperate. Children who have older brothers and sisters who are helpful and cooperative with younger children generally mimic their older siblings and are also helpful. Likewise, children with older siblings who are more destructive and aggressive with younger children may behave in more aggressive, destructive ways with their friends.

Studies have shown that parents can change destructive patterns of handling conflict. When parents handle disagreements openly and calmly and show respect for one another, children are more likely to behave in the same way with their friends.

If you have concerns about how your family manages conflict, you can talk to family counselors, parent educators, pediatricians, and other health care professionals.

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