

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Refusing To Talk After Arguing

Question: When my ten-year-old daughter has an argument with me, she uses the silent treatment. She refuses to talk to me or even be in the same room with me until she decides she isn't upset anymore. What can I do to help us communicate better with each other so this doesn't keep happening?

As your child gets older, the way you and she communicate with each other will grow and change. It can be frustrating and hurtful to have arguments with your child, especially if she shuts down and refuses to talk to you. By promoting the life skill of Communicating, you and your child can develop effective ways of dealing with arguments, while still staying connected.

Communicating is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

1

Encourage your child to express herself in different ways, both with and without words.

The studies of Edward Tronick of the University of Massachusetts, Boston have focused on the importance of relationships in children's development and learning. Tronick has found that moving in and out of sync with others—of being connected, then being disconnected and repairing a mismatch with a match—is not only normal, but it can also be a positive learning experience for both parent and child:

The experience of repair gives children a sense of mastery—"I can do this. I learned different ways of [reconnecting] with my mother and with my father."

When your child has many ways of expressing herself during times when you are not arguing, she will have more tools to use to reconnect with you when you do argue:

- Start a journal. She can write whatever she wants and get her emotions under control so that she can think more clearly about what she might want to say later.
- Write down how she would like the next conversation to go.
- Write a letter to the other person involved. If you are in an argument with your daughter, suggest that you each write a letter and then give them to each other.
- Use art supplies like paint, crayons, old magazines and glue. Ask her to create a collage or drawing that expresses how she feels. When she is ready to talk, ask her to share it with you.

2

Give your child space.

Although it is important to encourage open communication with your child, there are also moments when it is appropriate to give her time until she is ready to come to you. Taking a step back from a situation can help both of you calm down and think more clearly about what you want to say.

- Encourage your child to find her own place in your home where she can go when she needs time to be by herself. Have her decorate it and fill it with the things that she enjoys.
- Reassure your child that you will be there for her: "Let me know when you are ready to talk. I will be in the other room." You are showing your child that you value her growing independence, but are still there to support her when she needs you.

3

Give yourself space, too.

Make sure to take the time and space that you need so you can respond to your child calmly and clearly. This means taking a break in the moment and also making sure that you have people in your life who are there for you, regardless of what may be happening in your life.

- Use your supports. Friends, family, colleagues and other parents can all be valuable resources for helping you manage your own stress. Nathan Fox of the University of Maryland has found that parents who have supportive friends to turn to are less likely to transmit stress to their children.
- Find your own strategies. What helps you calm down? Deep breathing? Exercising? Listening to music? Use these tools to get a handle on your emotions, to relax and re-energize. Parenting is hard work and the more positive you feel, the better your interactions with your child will be.
- If you find yourself raising your voice and getting angry with your child, let her know: "I am getting upset, and I don't want to yell. So, I'm going to take a break. When I calm down, I will be ready to talk again."

4

Be an example of effective communication.

Be a role model of communication for your child. Show her how to admit mistakes and take responsibility. Use language and strategies that she can use like: "I'm sorry I yelled at that other car when I was driving. I need to remember to take a deep breath when I am in traffic."

5

Help your child figure out how to repair these mismatches in communication.

During a calm moment, have a discussion and brainstorm together to come up with strategies your

child can use when she is having trouble communicating difficult emotions.

- Sometimes these conversations happen best in a car or when you are taking a walk together. You can say: "I know that it can be hard to talk to me when you are upset. It's not fun for either of us. But, when you refuse to speak, I don't really know what is bothering you. So, I can't do anything to try to help."
- Let your child know: "I care about what you have to say and want to see if we can think of some ideas that might help us in those situations."
- Invite your child to come up with suggestions and give some of your own. One strategy might be to think of a special word or gesture that your child can use to let you know she needs some time or space to calm down. Keep trying different ideas until you find what works for both of you.

Alison Gopnik of the University of California at Berkeley notes that:

If we want to be successful and deal with other people, [we need] to understand the people around us— particularly what's going on in their minds.

6

Use everyday moments with your child to evaluate effective communication.

Look for opportunities to help your child think about what it means to communicate successfully. When watching television together, ask your child questions about the characters. Encourage your child to step back and ask herself these kinds of questions when she finds herself in a disagreement:

- What do I think he was trying to say?
- What is another way he could have said that?
- What do I think he was feeling?
- How would I deal with that situation?