Family feuds: collaborating to resolve family conflicts

As much as family members may love one another, conflict is an inevitable part of life: after all everyone has differing needs, wants and beliefs. Though dealing with family conflicts can be challenging, resolving issues in a constructive way is not only essential for the emotional health of everyone involved, it's also vital to the well-being of your family as a unit. Keep relations with your relatives positive and create a more harmonious family dynamic by:



Taking a closer look. Fights often fall into a pattern. Are you and loved ones engaging in the same conflict everyday? Is there a time of day when arguments tend to arise? How serious are the disagreements? Perhaps smaller squabbles can be resolved with a simple change in routine or by making sure family members aren't hungry, tired, or feeling pressed after work or school.

Broaching the subject. Before going head-on with others in your family about something that's bothering you, take a step back and think about the issue and your position. Make sure you can clearly state the source of the conflict as you see it. Why is it a problem? Is the situation itself a challenge or is it your feelings that are problematic? Don't expect to come to any resolution in the heat of the moment—arrange a time when everyone involved can come together to discuss the issue calmly and productively.

Clarifying the issue. One way to deal with an impasse is for everyone involved to get together to discuss the nature of the problem as they see it, including how it affects them and how they contribute to it. Be sure to pay close attention to your tone of voice and choice of words. If the discussion begins to heat up, take a break and come back when everyone has a calm, open mind. The more you're able to stay in the present and avoid finger-pointing or re-opening old wounds, the more potential you have for successful conflict resolution.

Listening. Whatever the reasons for the conflict, different styles of coping and communicating also factor into resolving tension. For conflicts to be resolved, everyone needs to feel they are really being heard. Listen with respect and try to understand what is being said. Avoid defensiveness and interruption. A parent or moderator may want to take notes to keep up with points of agreement and disagreement as they arise.

Brainstorming solutions. Once you're talking about an issue that's causing conflict, and everyone's shared their perspective, work together to draw up a long list of all the solutions you can imagine. Don't analyze them just yet: instead write down all the possibilities. Then go around again and get everyone's opinion on which solution each person thinks is the most reasonable and why. This should narrow down the possibilities and help you come to a fair solution everyone can live with.

Getting a commitment. For a chosen solution to work, the family members involved will need to commit to the chosen path, and decide what he or she will do to help make the solution work. Agree on responsibilities, consequences and limits for the actions required. Have one last go around where each person states what he or she is responsible for, making sure that everyone feels they have been heard and has a solid understanding of the source of the conflict.

Following up. It's important to check in with everyone at a later date about how they're feeling about the challenge faced. Does the family feel the solutions are going well? Fine-tuning is always possible. If the conflict is still raging without a resolution in sight, it may be time to seek support from another outside professional help. Sometimes an outside third-party can provide a fresh perspective on the situation.

Resolving conflict depends on mutual respect and willingness to find solutions everyone can live with. By making the effort to get to the bottom of a family conflict maturely and calmly, you'll increase communication and co-operation, build trust and mutual support and, above all, help create a more peaceful family dynamic.