

# Negotiate better relationships with your children

A problem-solving approach can help resolve family conflicts and improve your kids' coping skills.

Getting a good night's sleep and eating a healthy dinner might seem like obvious goals for parents to have for their young children, but kids won't always agree. When faced with back talk, tantrums, and tears, most parents vacillate between laying down the law and giving in, depending on how irritated or exhausted they are in the moment.

Scott Brown, a founding member of the Harvard Negotiation Project

at Harvard Law School and the father of four young children, suggests that there's a better way to cope with family conflict. In his book *How to Negotiate with Kids . . . Even When You Think You Shouldn't* (Viking, 2003), he outlines a framework that's based on the same mutual-gains negotiation techniques that are described each month in this newsletter. Although his advice is tailored to kids aged two to 12, the principles extend to teenagers and adult children as well.

parents teach their children to deal with conflict in productive ways.

Collaborative negotiation takes time to master, yet the potential rewards are great. Families that negotiate together build stronger long-term relationships and produce more self-disciplined, adaptive children. The following six principles of "persuasive parenting" from Brown's book will empower you and your child to negotiate lasting, creative solutions to conflict.

## "Negotiate with my kids? Are you nuts?"

In one of Scott Brown's workshops on negotiating with children, a grandmother raised her



hand. "I don't believe in negotiation," she said. She hadn't negotiated with her children when they were growing up, and she felt her daughter was negotiating too much now that she was a mother. Her husband (the grandfather) and her daughter, who were also attending the seminar, nodded in agreement.

Brown responded by pointing out that most hard-bargaining parents find that their children rebel more strongly or become sneaky in their teenage years. "If you teach your kids to talk and negotiate when they are young," Brown said, "they will probably do the same later."

At this point, the grandfather turned to his daughter. "He's right," he said. "You were hell as a teenager."

## Short-term fixes, long-term solutions

According to Brown, most parents tend to fall into two broad negotiating categories. Hard bargainers go overboard setting rules and administering punishments; their kids often respond by breaking these rules and withdrawing emotionally. By contrast, accommodators reward bad behavior with one concession after another. Fearful that their children will dislike them or rebel, these parents become overly permissive. Children of accommodators fail to learn limits and to respect the needs of others.

For a much smaller group of parents, relationship-centered goals are key. These parents rely on collaborative negotiation techniques to build trust and strengthen family ties. Just as smart business negotiators avoid bullying tactics and undue concessions, relationship-centered parents engage in a problem-solving process that enhances cooperation and satisfaction for the entire family. Rather than pretending that conflict always can be avoided or behaving as though kids must be dominated, these

## 1 Deal with your own emotions first.

The feelings that flood us during times of stress block rational thought and lead to knee-jerk reactions that exacerbate conflict with our kids. That doesn't mean you need to hide your emotions from your children when you're upset. The trick is to strike the right balance between emotion and reason.

As in professional negotiations, thorough preparation is the first step. Think about your hot-button issues in advance. When your temper flares, try to find a few quiet moments to take some deep breaths.

Next, consider your child's perspective. If your son has tracked mud from the front door to the couch, think about what he may be feeling. He might have had a bad day at school, just as you're worn out from work. When we think about our children's inner lives, we have more sympathy for their behavior and gain more control over our own emotions, writes Brown.

## 2 Help her cope with her emotions.

As parents know, children tend to



## When to lay down the law

Negotiation is an effective tool for managing conflict with your children in most realms, but others may be nonnegotiable:

- Safety, health, and hygiene (wearing bike helmets, taking baths)
- Matters of law (wearing seatbelts, respecting the town curfew)
- Physical abuse (hitting, biting, kicking)
- Manners and behavior (swearing or yelling in the house)

When a unilateral rule is needed, explain why: “I don’t want you to eat candy before dinner because it will ruin your appetite.”

Parents have different ideas about what can be negotiated, writes Brown. Although all parents would agree that safety is paramount, for instance, they’ll disagree about when children are old enough to be home alone. In addition, the number of “nonstarters” shrinks as your children grow and become more capable of making safe decisions.

be more emotional than adults. When we disapprove of a child’s emotions or respond to them with cold, hard logic, says Brown, she’s likely to feel ashamed or misunderstood. Suppose your daughter starts to cry because her older brother gets to stay up later than she does. She’s not going to be comforted by your explanation that she’ll get to stay up later as well in a few years.

For this reason, you’ll need to prepare for your child’s emotions and help her cope with them. If bedtime is particularly stressful for your daughter, set aside time to read and talk with her. By paying close attention, you can identify your child’s hot buttons. And when you help her face minor disappointments, you create a safe environment for emotional growth.

### 3 Listen to learn.

Students of negotiation understand the value of active listening. Listening improves your counterpart’s mood and costs you nothing but time. And when you listen, you learn about the other party’s interests rather than his positions.

Unfortunately, most parents don’t listen well, according to Brown—and their kids would be the first to agree. You may be so busy that multitasking seems to be the only option, but you’re not likely to listen well to your child while you’re driving or preparing dinner. Instead, schedule quiet time to find out what’s on your kid’s mind. Listen closely and acknowledge his feelings, resisting the urge to jump in with solutions and judgments.

### 4 Talk to teach.

How can you teach your child lessons without provoking arguments and conflicts? Start with short reminders rather than lectures, advises Brown.

Saying, “Shoes!” may be sufficient when your kid starts tracking in mud.

You can also influence children through *framing*, a persuasion technique discussed in past issues of *Negotiation*. Rather than ordering your child to be in bed in five minutes, set a kitchen timer and ask if she can set an Olympic record for the speediest bedtime.

When you are talking to your child about feelings, be sure to share your own: “It’s frustrating to me when you track in mud because I work hard to keep the house clean.” By doing so, you teach empathy and show your child that emotions are normal.

### 5 Use persuasion instead of coercion.

According to Brown, the most effective limits are those that children establish themselves. Like any negotiator, when a child feels empowered to participate in a solution, he’ll cooperate better with an agreement.

Suppose your 11-year-old tells you that he and his friends are planning to go downtown at night without any adults. Rather than staking out a position (“Over my dead body!”), begin by summing up both his and your concerns: “I understand that you

think you’re old enough to hang out downtown with your friends. Downtown can be dangerous, though, and I think you’re still too young.”

Next, work to brainstorm an agreement that meets both his and your needs. “We just want to go to the movies,” your son might say. “What’s the big deal?” If you see his point, you might agree to drive him and his friends to a matinee downtown and pick them up immediately afterward.

### 6 Discipline wisely.

What’s the best way to encourage good behavior and discourage bad behavior in children? Psychological research has shown that traditional forms of punishment and rewards, such as groundings and gold stars, may improve behavior in the short term, writes Brown, but these effects tend to be short-lived.

You can administer effective discipline by negotiating rules with your child before conflicts escalate. When your child does disobey you, administer the punishment consistently and calmly. When you do so, you teach self-discipline and internal values rather than simply showing your child how to read your moods. ♥