

All Families Fight. Here's How Successful Families Do It Differently There's an art to arguing.

By Brittany Wong, 2016

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All families argue, and it's the way they argue that determines if their relationship will thrive. "Instead of attacking each others' character, happy family members color inside the lines and express their own feelings," psychotherapist Vikki Stark, director of the Sedona Counselling Center of Montreal, told The Huffington Post. "It's fine to say, 'I'm furious with you right now!' It's not fine to say, 'You're a sorry excuse for a human being.'" What else stands out in happy family members' approach to arguments? Below, Stark and other relationship experts share eight ways healthy families may argue differently.

1. They don't run from fights. They stay in the process.

Family members in it for the long-haul don't shy away from discussing topics that could just as easily be swept under the rug. They ask the big, scary questions ASAP -- "When, if ever, are we going to do something about ... ?" "What are we going to do if you get that job in another state?" -- so they don't become bigger issues in the relationship later on, said Diane Sawaya Cloutier, an author and relationship expert. "When taboo or uncomfortable topics remain unaddressed, they can turn any benign event into a big drama that could have been avoided in the first place," she said. Family members who talk about it can manage more difficult potential dramas. Being vulnerable with difficult topics creates intimacy.

2. They start slow and take turns talking.

Arguments generally end the same way they began, said Bonnie Ray Kennan, a marriage and family therapist based in Southern California. Family members who've mastered the art of arguing fairly take things slow, addressing difficult conversations with a soft, reassuring tone, with great and careful kindness, and dialing it down, agreeing to take a time out for a few hours whenever things get too emotionally charged. They learn when they are in their reactive self. "Starting a difficult conversation softly and respectfully dramatically increases the chances of a good outcome," she said. "Conversely, a 'harsh start-up' is very hard to process well, especially for young men." Family members who argue with finesse also know the value of give and take: "One person speaks and the other person truly listens," Ray Kennan said.

3. They don't name call. Take 100% responsibility for your actions and thoughts.

Happy family relationships rarely involve knock-down, drag-out fights because the family members don't lower themselves to school-yard tactics: no matter how heated things get, there's no name calling, eye rolling, or biting sarcasm. Blaming is a form of violence. "All people understand that contemptuous behaviors are hard to take back and have a corrosive impact on a relationship," Ray Kennan said. "Over time, they've become mindful of the effects of such dirty fighting and so they have worked to take it out of their repertoire."

4. They know how to cool down.

They know when it's time to care for self and others. When things do get out of hand, savvy arguers know how to get a grip on their emotions. They value taking a time out, whether that means counting to ten and taking slow, deep breaths or simply telling the other family members, "Hey, can we revisit this later today or in the morning?" "These people know how to acknowledge and honor their emotions without getting overrun by them," Amy Kipp, a couples and family therapist in San Antonio, told HuffPost. "They use self-soothing skills to make sure they're at their best. When people are able to soothe themselves and take breaks, they're usually able to reach a resolution (or agree to disagree!) with more ease."

5. They set ground rules for arguments. Saying your truth without shame or blame.

It's not that long-time family members have never resorted to low blows or have said something regrettable during an argument. They have in the past -- and then they learned from the mistake. Once the emotionally charged fight ends, smart families lay down some ground rules for arguing so it never gets out of hand again, said author and relationship expert Mario P. Cloutier. The ground rules could be specific -- "We will not interrupt each other when one is giving his or her perspective" -- or more big picture: "It's not about being right. It's about getting to a common ground and resolving the problem," suggested Cloutier. To hold the right position is to destroy the relationship.

6. They acknowledge each other's feelings and points of view. They honor empathy as a healing tool for separation.

They may be bumping heads but family members in happy, long-time relationships with each other do their best to see both sides of the argument, Kipp said. "They may say, 'I know you see it differently than me, and I appreciate that you are listening to my perspective,'" she said. "These positive moments decrease defensiveness and allow for a more productive conversation."

7. They give each other the benefit of the doubt and believe they mean well.

People in healthy relationships who are able to have productive arguments don't jump to conclusions in the middle of fights. They quiet their insecurities, listen deeply, and try to give their family members the benefit of the doubt, Kipp said. "Healthy relationships mean that people assume that other people are doing the best they can at the moment," she explained. "In an argument, this means assuming that both people have the same goal: a mutually beneficial resolution. This allows arguments to be a team effort to achieve the goal rather than an adversarial fight."

8. They never forget that ultimately, they're a team, a family.

Even during their most tense arguments, healthy family members never forget that they're part of a team: for love and support ... until the argument exhausts them and all parties agree that they'd rather call a timeout and get a bite to eat or take a walk. "Family members with satisfying long-term relationships are able to remember that, no matter how angry they may be, life will continue after today," said Stark. "Because of that, they don't want to do lasting damage. Even in an emotional state, they are able to hang on to the long-term value of the family. They're a team, protecting their future together."