

Arguing with your Children? Try Responsive Listening

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Every year we speak in disbelief how quickly summer fades. In spite of the camp schedules, play-dates, family outings and vacations, summer has a more leisurely, less stressful rhythm than the school year. Bed times become a little more relaxed, sleeping in later a more frequent event, dressing in shorts or bathing suits acceptable and grazing on snacks throughout the day routine and maybe even encouraged.

Play, fun, leisure and relaxation are themes that get much more air time than the school year filled with structure, deadlines, schedules, and stress. Yes, parents feel those accelerated demands approach just as well as children. Monitoring homework assignments, worrying about morning routines that will fit into the bus schedule, calming your child's fears about new teachers, new peer relationships, all bubble as summer wanes. With this change, comes a common concern - arguing!

Although a certain amount of arguing between parents and children is inevitable and natural, when arguing becomes the definer of parent-child interactions, harmony can be a memory quickly faded and replaced with animosity and resentment. Constant arguing leads to a parent not feeling overly appreciative of their child and undermines the child's feeling of being taken seriously and respected by the parent. If the arguing becomes the main method of communication, the whole balance of parental authority can be eroded. Parent and child become adversaries. It's not the way things are supposed to be.

Arguments lead to emotionality, loss of control, shouting matches. It seems that children tend to become argumentative at the most inconvenient times. The whining, the protests, the complaining, from the very children you spend half your life doing things for – are as much fun as black flies in the summer. Parents frequently describe the wheedling, the demandingness, the “me, me, me” mentality that triggers resentment. The battle of wills becomes exhausting.

Simple resistance on the part of your child can fuel these arguments. The statement that it's time to go to bed can start the wheels in motion. The child becomes determined to prolong staying up, playing that game a little longer, watching TV for one more commercial, talking two more minutes on the phone. The child's persistence provokes a corresponding insistence on the part of the parent. The more recalcitrant your child, the more frustrated you become. Unfortunately, in the grip of this accelerating emotion, it's easy for parents to become frustrated and lose their cool.

Even the best intentioned, calmest parents can become reactive in the face of too many arguments. When the emotional reactivity leads to a battle of wills in which the only way for the parent to win is for the child to lose, a negative pattern can be instilled in which behavior may be determined but the relationship suffers. **A way to have behavioral**

standards and preserve a healthy relationship is through application of collaborative problem solving and communication techniques.

Responsive listening is a proactive technique that enables parents to respond to their child's arguments without getting caught up in a struggle. By listening instead of reacting to their child's feelings, parents can remain in control of their own emotions and of their interactions with argumentative children. Responsive listening isn't magic. It takes patience and imagination, but it can go a long way toward putting the parent in charge of arguments in which they once felt exasperated.

Responsive listening is a skill that allows the parent to take charge of the conversations with their child, not by laying down the law, but by shifting from being an opponent in a struggle for control to being a detective in search of learning through curiosity and interest what your child's opinions and wishes really are. All children argue, it's natural for them to push for what they want – responsive listening provides a means to resist just pushing back and starting the arguing cycle.

The five steps of responsive listening include:

1. When the stage is set for an argument to occur, check your impulse to argue back with your child and concentrate instead on listening to your child's feelings.
2. Be curious. Invite your child's expression of thoughts, feelings, and wishes, without defending or disagreeing.
3. Mirror your child's position in your own words to reflect what you heard them to be thinking or feeling.
4. Invite your child to comment on your impression and correct any misperceptions or allow to expand on their point of view.
5. Consider your decision, take time to pause and reflect before commenting or take more time to discuss the issue further at a later time.

Responsive listening is an empowerment tool for the parent. It can allow you to avoid the emotionality and reactivity that fuels arguments with your child. Remember it is a natural part of your child's development to express their wishes, test limits, push boundaries, and then to feel safe by pushing up against the predictable limits you employ. If you can use these responsive listening steps to stay cool, calm and collected, the child can persist in what they will do without provoking your emotionality and triggering another argument.