When parents are together

If you are caring for your child with a co-parent, the love, goodwill, caring and respect between you will contribute to your child's sense of security. And yet, as anyone who's had a child knows, it puts a strain on your relationship. Spontaneity may be compromised, time alone with your partner or other people you feel close to diminished, time on your own reduced or disappear completely. Your or your partner's relationship with sex may change, and opportunities for sex will happen less often. Sleep patterns will be disrupted and it is likely that you will have to manage on significantly less sleep; each member of a couple, or of a wider extended family, may have different parenting philosophies and the dynamics within the relationships may shift. Your work habits will change and, if you stop paid work, that may alter how you see yourself too. There will be an effect on your social life; there may be less or no contact with former colleagues; some friends may seem to recede for a while due to your preoccupation with your baby; and so on.

And this is by no means an exhaustive list. If you are in a couple, the transition from that partnership to becoming a family takes some getting used to. And just when you think you've got used to it, it changes again, as your child and/or your family continues to grow. These changes can also contribute to the resentment you may experience towards each other and towards your child. By the way, it's better to admit any resentment, even if only to yourself. If you don't, you are more likely to justify acting out of that feeling rather than taking responsibility for it.

Life is never static and being able to accept, work with and embrace change is more useful than resisting it. Thinking about how you can be flexible may be more effective than trying to regain what was lost. This doesn't mean you won't miss your old life sometimes. And it does mean you may need to work at

surrendering to your new one and embracing it. Remember Mark on p. 19; he resented the way in which his life was turned upside down by the change from being a couple to becoming a family of three and he learned to accept that change by tracing the source of his resentment to his own upbringing and finding meaning in childcare rather than just writing it off as a boring chore. He also found that when he accepted joint and equal responsibility for his child with his partner, this freed her up to be more of her old self again, rather than being wholly preoccupied with her baby.

How to argue and how not to argue

Most families argue – but it's how you work through any conflict (or don't) and how it's resolved (or not) that matters. Differences in and of themselves do not have to damage a relationship and therefore your child's environment. People with successful partnerships and functional families have disagreements and argue. That's a fact. But when they do they continue to respect and appreciate each other and to have their differences acknowledged and their feelings heard.

Now let's talk about the nuts and bolts of arguing. In any conflict, there is the context. That is what you are arguing about. Then there is how you feel about the conflict and how the other person feels about it. And then there is the process, which is how you go about solving the problem.

To tackle difference, it's important to know how you feel about the context and to share that. The next step is to learn how the other person feels about the context and to take their feelings into consideration. If feelings are left out of it, both sides can get more and more heated as they play what I call 'fact tennis', lobbing reasons over the net to each other, finding more and more to hit the other person with. In this style of arguing,

the aim of the conflict becomes to win points rather than find a workable solution. Finding out about differences and working through them is about understanding and compromise, not about winning.

Let's take a typical family argument, about the washing-up. The washing-up is the context, then there's how people feel about it. This is what happens when the process becomes fact tennis:

SERVER The trouble is, if you leave the washing-up not done, the food hardens on it and it is harder to wash off, so do it straightaway. *15–love*

RESPONDER It is a better use of my time if I leave the washing-up during the day and just do it all together once. *15 all*

SERVER It is unhygienic to leave the washing-up undone. *30–15*

RESPONDER Any accumulated bacteria will be killed when it is eventually washed up. *30 all*

SERVER The dirty dishes attract flies. *40–30*

RESPONDER It's winter. No flies have accumulated around the dirty dishes. *Deuce*

And so on. When one person eventually runs out of reasons and is therefore deemed to have 'lost', they do not feel loving or warm towards their opponent. And if the 'winner' feels good, it's at the expense of their partner.

Another style people use to deal with difference and conflict is what I call 'Look, squirrel!', or distraction. This is when, instead of talking about what is bothering you or someone else, you change the subject. So you see that the washing-up has not been done but, rather than address that problem, you say or do something else. This may be fine – it may be appropriate to delay talking about something – but it is not okay to avoid discussing differences altogether. If all conflict is avoided, what tends to happen is that intimacy is avoided as well, because

when too many subjects become taboo, politely skirting around each other can make things lonely.

A third arguing style is being a martyr. This is when you say, as you arrive home, 'Don't worry about the washing-up, I'll do it.' Unfortunately, what tends to happen in situations like this is that the martyr, rather than making everyone feel guilty, eventually becomes resentful and blames other people, or becomes a persecutor (see below) and starts flinging insults.

The persecutor attacks: 'You're a real pig for not doing the washing-up. Your hygiene standards are disgusting.' If you are on the other end of that comment, you feel like attacking back.

None of these four kinds of conflict makes for a great atmosphere in a family home. Conflict puts children on alert, threatens their sense of security and leaves them less able to be open and curious about the world. Instead, their energy and focus are switched into a sort of emergency mode.

What, then, is the ideal way to argue? When working through a difference, work with one issue at a time and think about what the argument is really about. Don't save up your grouches and pour them out on to the other person at once. Start with how the issue makes you feel, not with an attack or by blaming. So, back to the washing-up . . .

'I feel fed up when I come home after having washed up in the morning to see more of it. What would really make me feel better would be if you washed up your stuff during the day.'

The ideal style isn't about winning, it is about understanding. An answer might come back: 'Oh, sorry, darling, I don't want you to feel bad. I had so much work on. I can see it's not a great sight to come home to.' And the response to it might be: 'Yeah, you do have a lot on. Never mind. How about you wash and I'll dry?'

A good rule of thumb when arguing is to do it with 'I-statements', not 'you-statements', for example, 'I feel hurt when you don't answer me when you're on your phone', not 'You're always ignoring me when you're on your phone.' Few of us like

to be defined or pigeon-holed – especially negatively – by someone else. If you instead describe how what you hear or see makes you feel, then you are talking about yourself, which is far easier for the other person to hear.

Of course, no way of voicing a complaint is guaranteed to 'work', that is, ensure that you get what you want. But good relating is not about manipulation, it is about having good relationships. Being open about what you feel and what you want can help you to have good relationships, whereas manipulating someone doesn't make for a good connection.

Speaking in I-statements, not you-statements, owning your own feelings and finding out about and acknowledging the other person's feelings are usually the best ways to deal with the inevitable differences that arise in families. It will also help your child feel more secure, as it reduces resentments and promotes understanding. They will also be more likely to adopt this respectful and emotionally intelligent argument style themselves, having had it as their example.

One reason disagreements arise in the first place is when one person thinks they've been attacked on purpose when they haven't. This example happened in a typical family. (I'll call them the Heritage family.)

> Jonny, a twenty-two-year-old student, is inspecting his dad's old leather jacket. He says, 'You're sixty, Dad, you're never going to wear this again. Can I have it?'
>
> Keith, a teacher, has had a bad day of not understanding his son's generation at work, so is feeling old. And Jonny has hit a nerve. Keith raises his voice and says, 'What, can't you even wait for me to be dead before you start eyeing up my possessions?'
>
> Jonny feels like this has come out of nowhere, and now he feels attacked. 'Blimey, I only asked. Why are you always having a go at me?'

> 'I'm not having a go at you, but I don't like being treated as though I'm already dead.'

This isn't a serious dispute, and I'm pretty certain that Keith will end it by throwing Jonny his jacket and saying, 'You have it, then,' and Jonny saying, 'I don't want it now. You'll need something to wear in your coffin,' and they'll both laugh themselves into a truce. But if they don't understand what went on, they'll both still feel a bit hurt and something similar is liable to happen again.

So, let's see what was really going on by pretending there is a wise mediator there with them.

> 'He wants me dead,' says Keith.
>
> 'No, I don't, I want his jacket,' says Jonny.
>
> 'Same thing,' says Keith, realizing at the same time it is not the same thing.
>
> The mediator says, 'It's not the same thing but, today, for you, Keith, it feels like the same thing – and Jonny has no reason to know that. You, Keith, felt attacked. As Jonny didn't realize that you felt attacked, he felt what you saw as your retaliation came from nowhere, so he counter-attacked.'
>
> 'That's certainly true for me,' Jonny says.
>
> Keith is quiet, so the mediator says to him, 'Just because you felt attacked, it doesn't mean you were attacked.'
>
> 'He called me sixty!' Keith defensively replies.
>
> Mediator: 'Yes, he was hiding his feelings behind a fact, a habit he has picked up from all the "fact tennis" he's been witness to since he was born. Moving on, it seems you find being sixty hard to come to terms with. So you'd quite like to cling to symbols of your youth, like that leather jacket. There's no reason why you shouldn't, and you can say so if it's true.'

A new version of the conversation might sound like this:

'I love your leather jacket. Can I have it?'

'I need some time to think about that . . . I can see you really want it, but I'm not ready to let the jacket go. It's true, I may never wear it again, but I need time to get used to the idea of being as old as I am. And, in the meantime, clinging on to my youthful clothes is a comfort to me.'

'Sorry, my asking reminded you of being sixty.'

'Oh, don't worry, I need reminding. I'm feeling a bit old because I don't understand what some of my students are going on about.'

'Like what?'

'I've just got my head around what social media is, but what do they mean when they say "swipe left" at me?'

'Here, let me show you . . .'

Exercise: Unpack an argument

Think about the last disagreement you had with a loved one. Without getting caught up in who was right or who was wrong, unpack what happened like I did in the example between Jonny and Keith. Then, again as I did in that example, take a meta perspective to see the situation and work out the feelings of each protagonist. Then play the role of a wise mediator and think about how to change the dialogue in the disagreement and how it could have gone better.

Here is a quick recap list of what to remember when you're talking about a difficult subject or when you're getting annoyed or think that an argument is imminent:

1. Acknowledge your feelings and consider the other person's feelings. That means not making yourself 'right' and the other person 'wrong', not making yourself 'clever' and the other person 'stupid'. Nothing wears a relationship or a family down more than if the people within it insist on being the person who is right. Instead of thinking in terms of 'right' and 'wrong', think in terms of how you each feel.

2. Define yourself and not the other, so speak in I-statements and not you-statements.
3. Don't react, reflect. You don't always have to reflect before reacting – I'm not advocating that you lose all spontaneity – but if you feel annoyed or angry, I think it is a good idea to pause and understand why. If Keith had done that in the example above, he would have realized that the anger he felt towards his son when he asked for the jacket did not belong with his son.
4. Embrace your vulnerability, rather than fearing it. In the example above, Keith would also have realized he was scared of growing old and he was about to mask that fear with anger rather than allowing himself to be vulnerable. But it is only by allowing our vulnerability, being open about who we are, that we can have close relationships.
5. Don't assume the intent of the other person. Without assuming too much or projecting yourself on to the other, try to work out what they are feeling too, and admit it if you got it wrong. Understanding your own feelings and those of the person you are negotiating with is not only the cornerstone of negotiations, it is the foundation of functional relationships and of empathic parenting. It is never too late to start this way of interacting.

When parents are able to do all this, I've found that improvements in patterns of relating to one another usually come pretty swiftly.

Fostering goodwill

In a couple or in a family, having the ability to consider each other's feelings requires a store of goodwill. If you feel you're running low, you need to bolster it up.

So, what fosters goodwill? There seem to be two main ways