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CREATIVE PARENTING

Teaching How and When to Disagree

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

An important skill to teach your child is *how* and *when* to disagree, not only with you but also with others. Children need guidelines and skills to disagree appropriately so they can be safe and honored as having ideas and opinions of their own. If a child must always comply with your commands or demands, he may grow up to be a “doormat” or may rebel and have problems with authority figures. Learning these skills is especially important from ages six through 12.

We can look at the example of Jesus at the age of 12. When Jesus entered the temple for the first time, He questioned the teachers in regard to the prophecies. In humility He repeated the words of Scripture. He moved the rabbis’ hearts, even though he disagreed with them. When Mary and Joseph finally found him, He chose to continue his conversation with the rabbis. He knew when and how to disagree. Ellen White wrote that it was in His youth that Jesus learned the hard lessons of silence and patient endurance.

Children between the ages of six and 12 ask lots of questions and gather information, just as Jesus did. They compare, test, disagree with us, and break rules. They challenge parental values and hassle and argue. As they get older, they can be puzzling—open and affectionate one day, cantankerous and self-contained another day.

It’s important for children to know they can learn the rules that help them live with others, they can think before they say “Yes” or “No,” and they can learn from their mistakes. They need to learn that they can think for themselves

and get help instead of staying in distress. They need to be assured that *you will love them even when you differ with them.*

Sometimes parents insist on perfection and expect a child to learn skills without the necessary instructions, help, or standards. When a child’s time is so filled with lessons, teams, and activities; when they lack the unstructured time to explore their own interests; when the rules and values are too rigid or lacking; when there is an unwillingness to discuss beliefs and values, it makes it difficult for a child to develop these important skills. Be sure to offer love, safety, and protection while you teach your child.

► **Brainstorm:** Together make a list of times and situations when it would be OK to disagree. Let your child take the lead and resist offering your opinions until the list has been made. According to your family’s beliefs and values, use the following guidelines to teach how to disagree appropriately:

► **Eye Contact:** Have your child look at you so you know she is listening.

► **Control:** Help your child control her behavior if she feels sad, scared, or angry. That means letting her know that whining, shouting, or pouting are not appropriate when she is in disagreement with you.

► **Positive Thinking:** Teach him to make a positive statement about the situation about which he disagrees. For example, “I think you may have a good point. ...” Then he can state his disagreement and the reason by saying something like, “But I want to do this ... instead of ... because ...”

► **Listen:** Listen to your child’s opinion or disagreement. If appropriate to the situation, problem-solve together. For example, negotiate bed time for a special event, trade a task for a different one, etc.

► **Acceptance:** Teach your child that she may have to accept the situation even if she does not like it or thinks it is unfair. Explain the consequences for inappropriate behavior (such as whining, tantrums, or pouting). While it is OK to allow a child to feel miserable for a brief time, it’s important to also teach how to handle negative feelings in positive ways and to recognize and accept responsibility.

Teach her to say, “I don’t like this, but OK.” Be sure to affirm your child when she accepts the situation gracefully!

