

## LEARN TO STOP THE WAR AND HAVE FUN TOGETHER INSTEAD

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Many parents are turned off at the thought of a war between them and their children. Such a state often infers that they do not love their children and that they are irresponsible and ineffective parents. They are insulted at the mere thought of war. Good parents just would not allow their home to become an armed camp. On the other hand, children often call the conflict “war” because it best describes what is going on in many families today. They tell it like it is; a war is a war is a war. Regardless, most parents would agree that there is entirely too much conflict and deep down wish that they could find a way to improve family relationships and have more fun together.

What many parents do not realize however, is that, until conflict is resolved, there is little hope of truly having fun together. Over and over again, parents become discouraged as sincere attempts to have fun together disintegrate into conflict. Attempts to play games together often result in conflict over cheating. Outings are often ruined as children fight in the car and parents make endless threats in an effort to restore peace. What starts out to be a fun shopping tour at the local grocery ends up in an impossible struggle with an unruly demanding child. Funtime with company is often spoiled by entirely too many warnings and reprimands from parents. Parents, at the outset then, must recognize conflict for what it is and more importantly, learn what they can do to resolve it. This, in turn, will truly free the whole family to have more fun together.

I often ask parents, “How are things going between you and your children?” They usually reply, “Everything is okay and we are making out all right.” I ask further, “Do your children fight? Do you find yourself in daily conflict with your children?” “Oh yes,”

they say, “but that is human nature. My parents had to tolerate us and now we have to put up with the same annoying behavior.” I ask, “What do you do about it?” They usually respond, “We try to reason with them, let them know who is boss, use a lot of common sense, and only spank when we have to.” “Is the conflict reducing?” I ask. “Not much,” they reply, “but there does seem to be a little improvement as they get older.”

As unbelievable as it may seem, many parents have actually convinced themselves that the abnormal misbehavior of their children is normal human behavior. They believe that their children are merely going through horrible stages and ages. As useless as the misbehavior is, they still only see it as hopeless human nature. Many parents readily admit that yelling and spanking seldom help but, since most parents they know are also yelling and spanking, they consider it common sense and keep it up endlessly. As they view it, however, it is not war but rather only their somewhat miserable destiny together. It does not have to be this way. Parents and children are not victims of environment, human nature, ages and stages. They can learn to behave differently, to stop the war and to have fun instead.

While there are many things parents can do to stop the war, they are seldom the cause and should not be blamed for the senseless conflict which exists in almost all families today. Almost invariably at least one of the children will experiment with useless behavior designed to provoke. This in itself is not war. If however, a parent at this point grabs the bait and accepts the call to battle, the war may begin, continue or even intensify. It is futile to look for cause or pinpoint blame. At least two people have to be willing to fight. It is more realistic then to think in terms of how one person, particularly the parents, can stop the war.

It is difficult for parents to give up their self-appointed role as the boss. They have brainwashed themselves with the idea that they are absolutely responsible for their children. Even though they usually know that they cannot make a child do what he does not want to do or stop him from doing what he wants to do, they still try to control. They are sitting ducks for creative children who provoke them to battle. The result is war and, unfortunately, the parent seldom wins. The children have many momentary victories but, as in all wars, both parties lose in the long run.

When parents are fully aware of the war for what it is and, at the same time are not blaming themselves, they are well on their way to stopping the war. They must recognize that there is useless conflict with the helpless child who demands service and the “good” child who demands praise and reward as well as the “naughty” child who provokes war. When they can open themselves up to change without being defensive about their present methods, they can learn more effective ways of behaving. When they give up trying to control children and almost constantly telling them what to do, the children will provoke and defy much less. When they concentrate on changing their own behavior, they can find ways to stop the war.

As a first step, parents simply have to stop fighting, stop giving in, stop praising and stop punishing with all their children if they hope to stop the war. To be specific, here are three suggestions for experimentation: (1) stop looking, (2) stop talking, and (3) remove oneself from conflict. Almost immediately, there will be more time to have fun together and to do meaningful things with each other. Friendly feelings will increase and hostile feelings will decrease. Cooperation will replace competition. A family atmosphere

made to order for the development of healthy human beings will emerge but only after the war has stopped.

As parents extricate themselves from controlling, judging, struggling for power and giving undue service they will find to their amazement almost unlimited time and opportunities to have fun together in everyday living. However, it is not the quantity of time but rather the quality of time that counts. Working parents and parents without partners as well as all busy parents can find ample time each day to have fun together. It is a false idea indeed that parents should spend more time with their children to produce brighter and better children and to improve relationships. If anything, more time often results in more fighting and unnecessary service. It is the quality of time in short periods together like mealtime, bedtime, getting up in the morning, shopping, auto rides, and visiting friends that really counts. The relationship in these activities should be enjoyable, satisfying, fun, and encouraging, rather than controlling and judging. This is where we build “friendship insurance” for the many human relations problems which are certain to occur in a democratic family atmosphere.

There is a place nevertheless for activities which require more time. Family trips, walks together, a variety of games, and visits to museum, cultural affairs, and sporting events can be invaluable. It is important, however, that fun is the primary motive, such activities should not be occasions to criticize and correct children on manners or honesty. If they degenerate into sneaky lessons in history, grammar, or arithmetic, the value is questionable. Games particularly should be fun with no strings attached.

Having fun together depends heavily on involvement, cooperation and friendly relationships. This is when both talking and listening really help. Family members have

every reason to move toward each other rather than against or away. This is the time for development of ideas, beliefs and values and the creation of an atmosphere where family members can have a positive influence on each other without strings. This is the ultimate in helping and encouragement.

In summary, if you find yourself as a parent spending hours each day being a doormat or an opponent, just stop. It is certainly unwise to do for a child what he can do for himself and even more unwise to cooperate to fight. Children should have the privilege, for example, of getting up, dressing, eating, getting to school on time, doing homework, and going to bed all by themselves without a slave or a boss. The time saved can be creatively utilized in unlimited fun time and is almost foolproof insurance against the possibility of having to live with a tyrant or a spoiled child.