

issue now (the adolescent has an exam the next day), or when they simply need time to cool down. But avoidance doesn't heal wounds; it allows them to fester.

The fourth strategy is compromise: Parents and the adolescent meet each other halfway. Most of us were taught that compromise is the best solution to conflict. This is only partly true. Compromise is useful when the issue is not worth much time and effort (where to eat dinner tonight). It's also useful when time pressures force a quick solution (for example, when you're expecting a long-distance call, the adolescent needs to call a friend, and you compromise by limiting his call to five minutes). But compromise is not a lasting solution to serious differences. Neither party's needs are fully met. Both settle for less than they want.

The problem with all these responses is that they don't resolve the conflict. The issue is left up in the air, and needs and feelings are pushed under the rug. Moreover, with each of these strategies somebody loses. With cracking down, it's the adolescent; with giving in, it's the parent; with avoidance, it's both. Although compromise is preferable to the other three, both parties give up something (what Bolton calls a mini-lose/mini-lose outcome). There is an alternative to these no-win approaches.

### **Collaborative Problem-solving**

The goal of collaborative problem-solving is to find a win/win solution that satisfies everyone. This approach takes more time and energy than the others we have described. It requires the unhappy family member to confront one another, which isn't always pleasant. But in most cases it minimizes hostility and hurt feelings and maximizes the chances that you will truly resolve the issue.

## No-Win Solutions

*The most common ways parents attempt to resolve conflicts with their adolescents are cracking down, giving in, avoiding the problem, and compromise. Although each of these strategies has its uses, each also has drawbacks. There is an alternative: collaboration, which we will discuss shortly. First let's look at the others.*

*One way to end an argument with an adolescent is to crack down. Like a military officer pulling rank, parents lay down the law. When parents refuse to consider the adolescent's needs and desires and/or refuse to let her participate in the decision-making process, she is not going to be highly motivated to make the solution work. To the contrary, domination fosters resentment. It should be used only in emergencies, when quick, decisive action is vital (and parents do know best).*

*A second way to end conflict is to give in to the adolescent's wishes. Giving in or accommodation is appropriate when parents realize that the adolescent was right and they were wrong: It shows the adolescent that they are willing to listen and to learn, and that they are reasonable. Accommodation is also appropriate when the issue is trivial to the parents but not to the adolescent (for example, how your son dresses for a party). But it shouldn't become a habit. As one psychologist noted, "If you want to hate your child, just let him win all the time. That's a sure formula."*

*Avoidance is also common: Parents do everything they can to escape a confrontation with the adolescent. When a problem comes up, they change the subject, suggest the family member is making mountains out of molehills, or simply withdraw. Avoidance is useful when the issue is trivial (the adolescent forgot a minor chore), when parties to a conflict are too much under stress to deal with the*

*Conflict occurs when:*

- *One family member feels that others are threatening his or her values, perceptions, life-style, sense of fairness, or "territory."*
- *Family members agree on the final goal but disagree on how to arrive at that point.*
- *There is not enough of something to go around. The "something" may be tangible -- money, space, telephones -- or intangible -- time, attention, affection.*
- *Communication among family members has broken down.*

*For one or more of these reasons, you have reached an impasse. Unless you get beyond that impasse, hostility and resent are likely to build, and nit-picking, teasing, criticism, yelling, avoidance of one another, and stony silences will increase.*

*Conflict can improve and invigorate family relationships by helping family members to understand one another better and to be more tolerant of their individual differences, leading them to clarify issues and ideas in a way that clears the air, and forcing them to redefine their goals or set new goals that are more satisfactory to everyone. When conflicts are resolved in a positive way, everyone wins.*

*Conflict harms family relationships when it takes the form of personality attacks and power struggles. Negative conflicts leads to resentment and hostility; causes confusion, insecurity, and diminished self-esteem; and makes productive, rational discussion of issues and behavior in the future difficult, if not impossible. When family members are at war, nobody wins.*

*There are six basic steps to collaborative problem-solving. Again, the formula may seem awkward at first, but after you've used it several times it will begin to seem more natural. This approach works best if you choose a time and place when both you and the adolescent will not be distracted, limit the discussion to a specific issue, and secure in advance the adolescent's agreement to try to work out a solution.*

**Step 1. Establish ground rules.** *The ground rules for conflict resolution are essentially the rules of a fair fight. Each party agrees to treat the other party with respect -- no name-calling, sarcasm, or put-downs -- and to listen to the other person's point of view. Parents can set the stage by stating at the beginning their desire to be fair.*

**Step 2. Reach mutual understanding.** *The next step is to take turns being understood. This means that each of you will have the opportunity to say what you think the real problem is and how you feel about it. It's important that you get it off your chest. But it's also important to avoid loaded words and phrases, accusations, and evaluations, and to focus on the issue, not on personalities. Each of you also has the right to be understood. This is where reflective listening comes in. When you've described the problem as you see it, let the adolescent speak her piece. Then rephrase the adolescent's point of view and ask her to restate yours, so that you are sure you understand one another.*

**Step 3. Brainstorm.** *The next step is for each of you to think of as many solutions to the problem as you can. The goal of brainstorming is quantity, not quality. At this stage, no idea should be rejected because it's crazy, or too expensive, or one of you thinks it is dumb. Zany ideas can reduce tension and keep creative juices flowing. Set a time limit (five minutes should be enough) and write down everything you can think of.*

**Step 4. Agree to one or more solutions.** *The best way to go about this is for each of you to select the options you like best. (Don't discuss each and every option; this can lead to endless, often fruitless, debate.) Then see where your interests coincide. Have you chosen any of the same options? Some give and take, or negotiation, will be necessary at this stage (e.g., a mother may agree to stop nagging if the son/daughter picks up his/her clothes and makes the bed daily). And you need to think through the practical considerations (the family can't afford a maid). But neither of you should agree to something you still find unacceptable.*

**Step 5. Write down your agreement.** *This may sound excessively formal, but memory can be faulty. If either of you thinks the other has broken the agreement, you can refer to your contract.*

**Step 6. Set a time for a follow-up discussion to evaluate your progress.** *This is as important as the first five steps. One of you might not live up to the agreement, or the solution might not be as elegant as you thought, and you will have to work out the bugs.*

*This six-step formula can be applied to a variety of situations, from arguments over the adolescent's curfew to decisions about family vacations. In some cases you won't be able to reach an agreement. When it comes to health and safety, parents may have to make a unilateral decision. But adolescents are far more likely to go along with you when they participate in the decision-making process and when they see that you are taking their needs and desires seriously.*