

Ten Rules for a Fair Fight

1. Pray about it. In your own words, express your anger, hurt, and even guilt to the Lord. Have faith that you are not merely talking to the walls or to yourself, but to the God who made you and knows you better than you know yourself. The Holy Spirit will guide you as you struggle with the best ways to resolve the conflict in your relationships.

2. Learn the difference between righteous anger and sinful anger. The writer of Psalm 4 advises in verse 4, "Be angry, but sin not" (Revised Standard Version). Some things are important enough to get angry about. At those times, you get angry because you care. Righteous anger motivates you to stand up for what is right or to speak up for someone who is being treated unfairly. If your goal is to hurt your opponent, to get revenge, or to get your own way, your anger is sinful.

3. Choose your battles wisely. Some things are simply not worth fighting over. How important to you and to the person with whom you disagree is the issue in dispute? Is it worth the anger, energy, and possibly worse situation that may be involved if you stand and fight rather than let it go?

4. Choose the best time and place. If your argument is a private matter, keep it that way. Making a public scene will only add embarrassment and frustration to an already tense situation. Sometimes it is best to talk over a sensitive issue at a time and place totally removed from

when and where it first came up. For example, if cleaning up your room is a hot issue at home, don't try to discuss your side of the story just after your dad has yelled at you for the tenth time in one day to clean it up. Wait for a more relaxed time to bring up the subject of your room and shared household responsibilities. But don't wait too long. It's a good idea to follow the apostle Paul's advice to the Ephesians, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (Ephesians 4:26, Revised Standard Version).

5. Stay on the subject. You only make matters worse when you bring up old grudges and past mistakes. Leave the past in the past unless you have learned something in a similar situation that would help more than hurt the present situation. It isn't fair to clobber someone with their past mistakes. It will also be tempting to add fuel to the fire by dealing with more than one issue at a time. You know you're starting to fight dirty when you say something like, "And that reminds me of another thing . . ."

6. Try to understand the other person's point of view. Look at the big picture, the whole situation that has brought about this conflict. What other pressures are adding to your frustration or anger when a fight breaks out? What is going on in the life of the person with whom you are fighting? Parents are trying to handle work-related stress, their marriage relationship, financial obligations, and the real and imagined responsibility for your well-being and development.

Your friends deal with the same family squabbles, school performance expectations, and social pressures that you have to juggle. Evaluate your peers' motives when they try to pressure you into something. Before, during, and after your fight, take time to listen and understand.

7. Say I more than you. Start your sentences with phrases like, "I am confused about . . ." or "I'm frustrated about . . ." Express how you are feeling, and invite the other person to express how they are feeling. When you say things like "You don't understand" or "You make me so mad," you are telling someone else how they think or feel. You are blaming them for the situation from the very beginning. Sending "I" messages helps you explain your side of the story without accusing or blaming the other person. Be honest with yourself about your motives in this argument. **CAUTION:** There are some unfair "you" messages disguised as "I" messages that go like this: "I can't believe you did that" or "I can't trust you any farther than I can throw you."

8. Avoid "attack" language such as the use of threats ("I'll run away" or "I'll just sneak out, then"), exaggerated generalizations ("You always say that" or "You never let me go out"), accusations ("You don't love me" or "You don't trust me"), or psychological manipulation ("I'm just a poor, stupid, ugly kid that nobody likes" or "I hate you. Don't ever speak to me again"). When you attack or are attacked, defense mechanisms take over. You may be tempted to with-

draw into silence or counterattack with all the anger and hate you can muster. Be courteous and mature. Avoid sarcasm, rudeness, and disrespect—even with peers.

9. Learn to separate persons from their behavior. In religious language—hate sin, love sinners. It is fine to hate being teased by your older brother, but it is not fine to hate your brother. It is understandable to get angry with your parents' lack of understanding. Your anger at the misunderstanding will motivate you to talk things over with your folks. Anger directed at people is destructive and sinful. Anger directed at circumstances and behavior can be constructive and graceful. When Jesus confronted the woman caught in the act of adultery, he said to her, in effect, "I hate your sin, but I love you."

10. Remember, the goal is to communicate. A good argument is one in which we are heard, and we also hear. Strengthening the relationship is more important than scoring points or landing psychological punches. When you say what you believe aloud to another person, you make a statement about who you are. Arguing can help you clarify your own values. When you confront another person's feelings and views, you learn more about that person and about the strength of your own convictions.