

Do you play the argument game?

“Mom, you told me I could go over to Jimmy’s.”

“I said you could go after your homework is done. You forgot that part.”

“But I don’t have to do my homework now. I have after dinner to do it.”

“You always say that and then after dinner comes, and it doesn’t get done.”

“It does too. You just don’t want me to have any fun.”

“Now that is just not true. What did we do yesterday and what did you get to do all weekend? I let you do what you want all the time.”

“No you don’t. You let Jenny do what she wants, but not me. It’s not fair. I hate this family.”

Etc., etc., etc.

How often do you allow yourself to get sucked into an argument, sacrifice your best intentions, and lose all hope of setting a limit? Is the battle ever worth it? Does it ever accomplish what you want? If you do win, it means your child loses and resentment builds creating more resistance next time.

We don’t seem to understand that we can walk away from the skirmish if we choose to. But walking away feels weak. We are so determined to make our children see it our way. Every time you engage in one of those no-win arguments that leaves you exhausted and angry, it is because you want to win and convince your child that you are right, and he is wrong.

Brent knows his mother. If he keeps resisting, she will play along with comeback after comeback. He has the energy to keep the argument going for hours if she continues to argue her own logic. She gets worn out first. Then he can play the guilt because he knows she can’t stand it when he feels victim to sibling inequality.

In effect, the argument is between two children fighting for a win, out to make the other give up. Here’s the challenge: Can you be the grown up and step out of it, even if it seems that your child may have won? Can you resist engaging in the argument and allow your child to feel angry and frustrated? Much better to say what you mean and mean what you say. Your confidence is lost when you

get sucked in or feel responsible for your child's happiness and try to make him see it your way.

Here are two more effective ways to handle the argument with Brent:

- 1) As soon as Brent said he could do his homework after dinner, the previous agreement about Jimmy's was broken. His mother can be more effective by simply and neutrally repeating, "After your homework is done, you may go to Jimmy's. Let me know then, and I'll take you." Period. No tone, no attitude, simply state it. When his mother starts rationalizing about how he has promised before with bad results, she sets up the combat, and Brent knows he's got her. He can play the game better. Even if he doesn't get to go to Jimmy's, he's won the point.
- 2) She can renegotiate and allow Brent to benefit from pleading a strong case teaching him good negotiating skills. "In order for me to agree to homework after dinner, I need assurance that it will get done. How can you give me that?" This puts Brent in the position of having to come up with a plan in order to get what he wants. He also knows that if he blows it, he loses points for his next argument. After he gives his assurance plan, his mother can say, "And what if that doesn't happen? What should your consequence be?" He now has to come up with his own self-correct plan.

Both of these maintain the parent's authority yet do not put down, criticize or belittle Brent to fuel future resistance. Neither gives any attention to his attempts to rearrange facts or words to plead his case. The second *allows* Brent the win—much different than losing the fight—while giving him the opportunity to be accountable. He is given full responsibility for the case he fights.

Brent's mother must make sure the consequence is carried out if his plan to do homework after dinner doesn't happen. He may have written her a note promising to do the homework and signed it. Added may have been the agreed to consequence, which should be as immediate as possible. If it looks like he is dawdling after dinner, she can merely hold up the note. Nothing further needs to be said once the reminder is given. If the homework does not get done, the consequence—perhaps, not getting taken to basketball practice the next

afternoon—can be calmly carried out. (In addition to the natural consequence of not getting homework handed in).

Brent may argue again the next afternoon when it's time for basketball practice. No need to get sucked in again reminding him of their agreement when he pleads that nobody loves him. His mother can show him the note, empathize with his frustration at not getting to go to practice, and leave it at that.