

Five Rules for Fighting Fair

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Disagreements happen in all relationships, but disagreements become destructive when people fight “dirty.” Fighting dirty means that you try to win the disagreement or argument at all costs, without caring about the impact that your tactics have upon the relationship afterwards. Whether the disagreement is occurring between employee and boss, or marital partners, or parent and teen, fighting dirty usually costs much more than winning any one single argument is worth. Therefore, let’s talk about how to fight fair.

The first principle of fighting fair is to make a conscious decision that your relationship with the other person is more important than winning any one single argument. It can be hard to make this decision in the heat of the moment. Take the time now to think about recent arguments you have had and whether it is worth it to you to put the relationship first the next time you have a disagreement with that same person.

Secondly, fighting fair means that you attack the problem rather than the other person. Perhaps the problem is that you and the other person do not share the same politics, or you and your boss do not agree on a strategy for approaching a business situation, or you and your teen do not agree on the teen’s curfew. Before you get too carried away with your argument, take a mental step back and put into words what the problem is that you are trying to solve. “I want to change this person’s mind about their vote for the congressional election,” or “I want my boss to see how good my idea is for fixing our problem with distribution,” or “I want my son to accept his curfew and come home on time so I don’t have to ground him so much” – describing the problem and your goals for the solution help you to stay focused, and stay away from verbally attacking the other person.

A third principle for fighting fair is to use your best communication skills. Describe the focus of the problem or the gist of the disagreement to the other person, so that s/he can understand where you are coming from and how you see it. Start your sentences with “I” statements and stick to facts; beware of phrases like “you always do X” or “you never do Y.” It should go without saying that there is no room for name-calling in a fair fight; however, many people will get into adjectives like “stupid” or “loser” when they are angry with someone else and don’t care if they hurt them or not. Remember that good communicators listen as much as they talk, if not more.

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Taking a time-out is a fourth useful strategy when trying to fight fair. Just like in a football game, sometimes the two parties need to go to the sidelines and regroup. The hand signal used by referees to call a time-out works well amongst family members or friends. When things get too heated, request a time-out and pinpoint when you will return to finish your discussion. In football, the teams have a few short moments to rest and come up with another strategy during a time-out; during a disagreement, it usually takes at least 15 minutes for people to calm down enough to approach the problem more effectively again. Sometimes the time-out will need to be even longer than that to prevent people from saying things they will regret later.

Finally, attention must be paid to how the argument ends up. Unresolved disagreements and anger tend to fester in relationships, eroding trust. Did you and the other person come to some kind of agreement after your discussion? If not, how are you going to handle the issue going forward? Stating explicitly that you are agreeing to disagree and that you will work to accept the other person's point of view on the problem can sometimes be the best you can do.



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