Children need to see parents argue

"Not in front of the children!"

This has been a longstanding mandate for "good" parents. Heaven forbid that the children be exposed to the psychological trauma of witnessing an argument between mom and dad.

Of course, children are blind. They are oblivious to the cold stares exchanged between their parents during the uncharacteristic, tense periods of silence.

Of course, they are blissfully ignorant of the significance of mom's and dad's prolonged retreat to separate corners, one perhaps in the garage and the other in the kitchen.

And of course, neither consciously nor unconsciously do children have any awareness that all is not well in their little world.

FORTUNATELY, many parents are now beginning to question the wisdom of that old-fashioned mandate.

Obviously, it is not desirable for children to witness domestic violence, vicious verbal attacks, or the frank discussion of dissatisfaction over the frequency or quality of sexual encounters.

Nevertheless, day-to-day disagreements between two adults living under the same roof are inevitable. Why must we protect our children from this normal fact of life?

The old party line would respond that if children witness their parents arguing, they would feel insecure, perhaps fearing that their parents no longer love each other. This reasoning rests on the assumptions stated ironically above: Children are blind and ignorant.

If you currently have children at home, whether they're 3 or 13, you are probably quite aware that neither is true.

CHILDREN ARE especially sensitive to changes in the *emotional environment of the home.*

The problem is that they lack the wisdom and experience to accurately interpret the subtle signs of anger being exchanged between mom and dad.

The uncertainty over why there is coolness in the air can be more frightening for a child than the clear understanding that mom is upset with dad because he wants to join a third bowling league.

psychology
Dennis Sugrue

Even more dangerous is the possibility that the child interprets the poorly disguised tension in the home as being the result of something the child has done.

The greatest tragedy resulting from parents hiding all of their disputes from their children is that the children themselves often fail to learn how to resolve conflicts.

Dealing with anger constructively is an extremely difficult skill for a person to develop. If children cannot learn this skill from observing parents, from where else might they learn?

IF PARENTS are going to argue in front of their children, it is important that they do indeed model good conflict-resolution skills. There are some common-sense guidelines which can help mom and dad in both successfully resolving the conflict and in providing a valuable lesson for the children:

- Avoid name-calling. Remarks about the other person's physical appearance, ethnic background or questionable birth origins serve no constructive purpose and only enflame the situation and create deeper wounds requiring more time to heal.
- For an argument to have a constructive outcome, stick to the present issue. When you are angry, it is very tempting to cite one example after another of the other person's mistakes and failures. Comparisons between the other person and one of their parents is another popular strategy for escalating the conflict and for sticking the dagger in deeper.

It is extremely difficult for your spouse to be reasonable or to even remember what the original disagreement was about when, in you know, you reminded them that they forgot last Valentine's Day, that they leave dirty clothes in a pile, that they never have enough time for the family and that they belch at the dinner table. Where do they begin in resolving [illegible]

- The disagreement is not a sporting competition where the object is to dazzle and overwhelm the opponent. [illegible] conflict can be taken out and resolved in a calmly entertaining way.

CHILDREN, who witness their parents calmly and constructively resolving conflicts, learn a vital lesson for adult life. People who love each other can disagree and become angry with each other without destroying their love or mutual respect.

And so the new mandate for conscientious parents might be: *In front of the children, but do it right!*

Dennis Sugrue, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist at Henry Ford Hospital. He welcomes questions and topics for future articles. He regrets that he is unable to answer questions on an individual basis. Questions and topics may be submitted in care of this newspaper.

Nutrition plan aids moms, kids

If you're pregnant and can't afford nutritious food, or if you have young children whose diets may be deficient, Oakland County has a Women, Infants and Children Nutrition program (WIC) which may help.

At present there is no waiting list, and immediate appointments are available, according to County Executive Daniel T. Murphy.

WIC is operated from three offices: the Social Services building at 196 Oakland, Pontiac; the Wixom Municipal building, 49045 W. Pontiac Trail; and at 411 S. Lafayette, Royal Oak. Telephone number for appointments is 858-1272.

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