

Study: Avoiding blame is smart way to resolve family conflicts

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Dr. Jackie Nelson

A UT Dallas researcher says there's a smart way for children and parents to disagree—and it doesn't involve casting blame.

Dr. Jackie Nelson, assistant professor in the School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, said [parents](#) and children who focused discussions on future-oriented planning, rather than accusations and culpability, were more likely to reach a compromise in which both parents' and children's goals are realized. In addition, her research showed that how conflicts are resolved can predict changes in children's externalizing problems a year later.

"Our research shows that when parents and children use constructive strategies, there is a better plan to manage future conflicts, skills that children are likely taking into the peer domain," Nelson said.

To conduct the research, recently published in the *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, Nelson brought mothers and their 5- to 7-year-old children into her lab. Lab team members separately questioned both the parent and the child about topics that elicited conflict between the two, then asked the mother and child to talk about two of the topics for seven minutes each while being observed. Common conflict topics included fighting with siblings, household chores, lying to parents and bedtime routines.

"We looked at the dynamics of the conversations, including positive and negative emotion, and the specific communication strategies they used," Nelson said.

Nelson found that these discussions could include constructive or destructive language. Destructive interactions included placing blame and making accusations, while constructive interactions were characterized by parent sensitivity and valuing the child's perspective on the dispute.

According to the study, engaging in parent-child conflict is socially and cognitively challenging for early school-age children. Thus, children who are able to focus on family discussions without becoming overly frustrated are better able to avoid negative behavior. Children with less reactive temperaments were better able to meet this challenge.

In related research that will be published soon, Nelson looked at conflict discussions that occur outside the lab, evaluating whether day-to-day stressors impact the ability of parents to use constructive strategies to resolve conflicts at home. Parents reported each evening on the stress and conflicts they experienced over the course of one week.

"Parents experience stress at work, home and in marital relationships—and the extent of this stress varies day to day. We found that those types of stressors were related to less constructive and more destructive qualities of a specific conflict interaction between mothers and their 5- to 8-year-old children on those days," Nelson said.

She said future work will investigate characteristics of families that help mitigate the negative effects of daily stress on parent-child conflict interactions, such as parents' coping skills and the quality of the co-parenting relationship between mothers and fathers.

She said that while this study did not include adolescents, other studies have similarly shown that conflicts between teens and their parents also can be managed sensitively, which can be helpful to adolescents as they learn how to work out [conflicts](#) with parents, classmates and others.

"Conflicts between parents and children are a common feature of family life," Nelson said. "We're looking for ways families navigate opposition that are more adaptive for parent-child relationships and [children](#)'s social-emotional development."

More information: J. A. Nelson. Child reactivity moderates the over-time association between mother-child conflict quality and externalizing problems, *International Journal of Behavioral Development* (2015). [DOI: 10.1177/0165025415573643](#)

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