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## Keep Your Cool When Kids Want to Argue

Ten-year-old Kayla whines to her mother, "Let me stay home when you go Aunt Sally's. Pleeeeease?"

Her mother, Rose, says no; "You aren't old enough to say alone all evening."

"I am too. My friends do it all the time."

Back and forth the argument goes. With escalating frustration and anger on both sides, the threats and insults begin.

"I won't go. You can't make me!"

"Don't make me carry you to the car."

"You're so stupid. I hate you!"

Kids can drive adults crazy with arguments. It helps to keep in mind that kids' cantankerous confrontations are normal, albeit annoying, for kids from about 2- or 3-years-old and up. It's about testing their limits, discovering their power or lack of it, and learning to express their feelings.

Parents and other caregiving adults can help kids learn to communicate their needs and wishes without resorting to arguing. Below are a few good strategies to help you set a good example and keep your cool when your kids challenge you to a battle of wills.

### Plan ahead for the battle.

When you plan ahead for ways to deal with uprisings, you can get the upper hand more quickly and prevent all out war. Try to establish house rules and consequences, together with the kids, during family meetings. If Rose and Kayla had previously determined the rules for staying home alone, Rose might not need to force the subject. She could say, "we agreed that you will not stay home alone for more than 30 minutes at a time while you are ten. That's our rule." Kayla might continue to press, but Rose could stand her ground. "If you have a problem with the rule, bring it up at the next family

meeting. Case closed."

### Pause and Listen.

Sometimes there is something more important to the story than the initial complaint, but important messages tend to get lost during arguments. Rose might have avoided a scene and learned something important by simply pausing and listening.

Kayla: "But why can't I stay home . . . ?"

Rose: Pause. Listen.

Kayla: "Pleeeeease?"

Rose: Pause. Listen.

Kayla: "Aunt Sally teases me and embarrasses me."

Rose: Pause. Listen.

Kayla: "Well then, can I at least take a book along, so I don't have to sit there and be humiliated the whole time?"

Rose: "Yes. And maybe we can let Aunt Sally know, in a nice way, that the teasing is making you uncomfortable."

By pausing and listening, Rose could give Kayla time to think about and express what was really bothering her. Kayla would see that it is safe to bring up a sensitive issue with her mother.

### Offer a choice.

Arguing is usually about power. By offering choices, adults can give kids a little power without compromising their own.

"You have two choices," Rose could have said. "One, you can continue to complain and feel miserable, or two, you can take your new puzzle book along to make the time pass faster while we are there."

### Reject the Disrespect

Kids don't always have the maturity to express their feelings logically, so don't take their outbursts personally. For example, "I hate you" probably means

"I want you to know how bad I feel, so I'll make you feel bad too."

Rose could take the punch out of Kayla's "I hate you" by staying calm and letting it pass.

Rose: "Okay, you hate me. Now let's go."

If insults, back talk, whining, or other negative argument ploys continue, Rose could stand her ground without agitation by steadfastly refusing to listen.

Rose: "I will not listen to you when you use a whiny tone of voice."

### Acknowledge Good Communication Skills

Recognize and acknowledge when your kids make their requests in a calm, thoughtful manner.

Kayla: "Mom, I don't want to go to Aunt Sally's because she teases and embarrasses me. Can I stay home, please?"

Rose: "I didn't realize you felt that way about Aunt Sally. I'm glad you shared that with me. Let's talk about it some more in the car, and maybe we can figure something out."

If arguments are a chronic problem in your family, consider talking to a Student Assistance Program (SAP) counselor. A counselor can provide you with a variety of resources and more strategies to help make your household more argument-free.

**Kid troubles?** Call the Student Assistance Program and arrange to see a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members. Call (515) 244-6090 or toll free (800) 327-4692. Counselors are on call 24 hours a day.