



# MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS DURING **DIFFICULT TIMES**



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## A PARENTS GUIDE

The way we function as individuals influences every aspect of our lives. Not just our personal stuff, but also relationships, family and work. As parents we want our children to grow up healthy, both physically and emotionally, and the best path for achieving this is to model good behaviours. These days, modelling good family behaviour isn't as simple as it sounds. In fact, it can be downright difficult and often we fail at the simplest of tasks as parents.

Disagreements between parents is a normal part of healthy relationships. Disagreement can be heightened to become conflict especially if you are feeling stressed, anxious, fearful, worried and even angry about your future. When parental conflict becomes frequent, intense and poorly resolved it can put children's mental health and wellbeing at risk.

As a parent, it is important that you take the time out of your hectic schedule to look after yourself, dealing with your own mental health and building resilience allows for you to be more effective in looking after your children.

It is important to remember that no two families are the same and we all are challenged in different ways. In some families the challenge is finances, in others it could be housing, hidden harms, mental health issues, loneliness and feelings of inadequacy.

We tend to lead hectic lives, and our family members (even small children) can have busy schedules. Constant distractions, uncertainty and stress of life can get in the way of positive interactions between parents and children, as well as between siblings.

So, learning how to be present with your children is key. Not simply being in the same room but paying real attention and modelling healthy relationships (including how we resolve conflict). If you do this, children will observe that they matter and that family relationships are worth nurturing and they will feel prioritised. It's vital for children to have a sense of belonging and connection. This type of connection fosters optimal brain development, good mental health and wellbeing.

All of the information, tips and activities in this guide are designed to help parents better manage their wellbeing during times of stress and find constructive ways to resolve disagreements without escalating into destructive conflict. I hope you feel closer, more connected, cohesive and continue to grow as a family.



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# THE IMPACT OF PARENT CONFLICT ON CHILD WELLBEING

Conflict between parents is a normal part of relationships.

But when conflict between parents is frequent, intense and poorly resolved; it can harm children's wellbeing regardless of whether parents are together or separated.

Destructive behaviour includes:- aggression, silent treatment, lack of respect, emotional control, lack of resolution and in their most extreme form domestic abuse and other hidden harms.

As parents, the way you manage any problems or disagreements in your relationship affects your children.

Parental conflict can affect children of all ages.

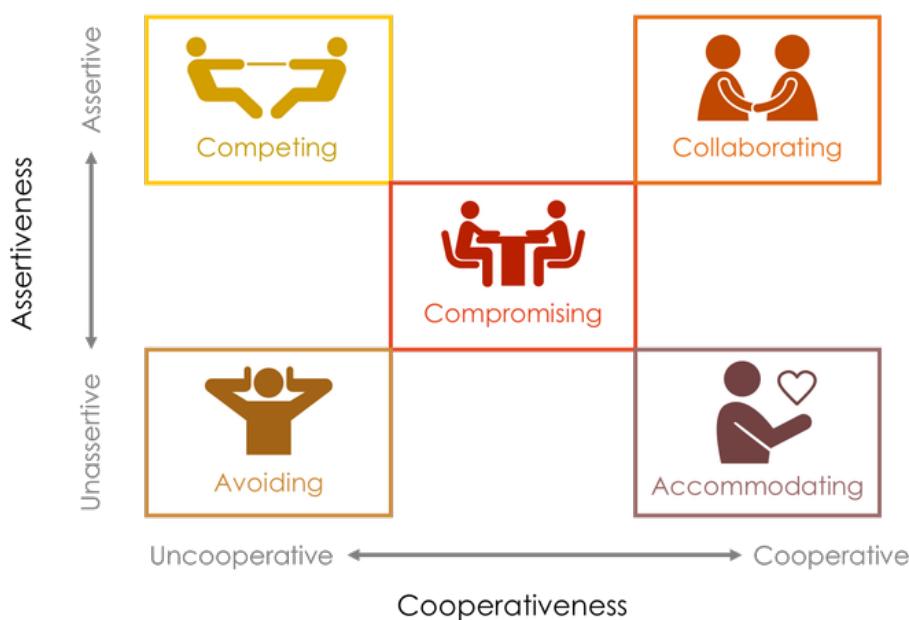
- Babies as young as six months can show high signs of distress such as elevated heart rate in response to open hostile exchanges between their parents.
- Infants and children up to the age of five years show signs of distress by crying, acting out, freezing, as well as withdrawing from or attempting to intervene in the actual conflict itself.
- Children between the ages of 6 and 17 years show signs of emotional and behavioural distress when exposed to ongoing, hostile arguments between parents.

By managing problems positively and constructively, you can protect your children from the negative impact of conflict.

# WHAT IS YOUR CONFLICT STYLE?

Building and developing healthy conflict resolution skills will help you to better understand how to respond to conflict in the family. Understanding the different methods can diffuse a situation, manage disagreements and reach an agreement.

The five styles of conflict include:



Source: - Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument Model

**Avoiding or withdrawing** from a conflict. An examples of this could be pretending there is nothing wrong, stonewalling or completely shutting down.

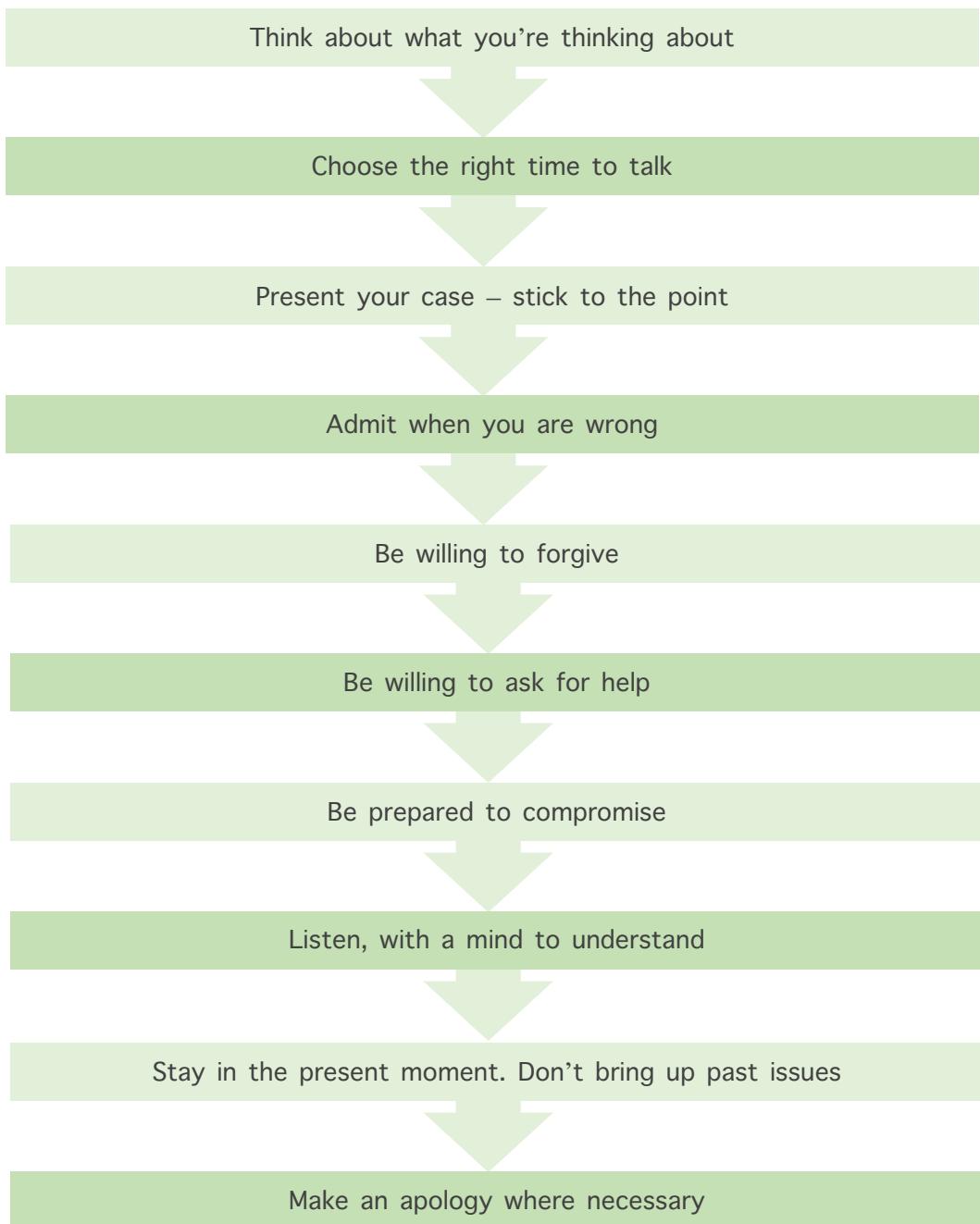
**Giving in or accommodating** the other person. Whilst this style can lead to making peace and moving forward, if not addressed properly, it can also lead to feelings of resentment toward the other party.

**Standing your ground.** This is assertive, but can be viewed as aggressive, combative and inconsiderate, especially if one is not willing to listen to the other persons point of view.

**Compromising** is when both parties look for common ground to resolve the conflict.

**Collaborating** involves listening to both sides, discussing areas of agreement and goals, and ensuring that all parties understand and respect each other.

# 10 STEPS TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION



# RECOGNISING DOMESTIC ABUSE

Anyone can be a victim of domestic abuse, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, race, religion, socio-economic status, sexuality or background. Life itself has been a difficult and a worrying time for many due to the pandemic, economy, change of lifestyle and sickness. It is particularly more difficult for adults and children living with abuse.

## WHAT IS DOMESTIC ABUSE?

Domestic abuse is not always physical violence. It can also include:

- coercive control and 'gaslighting'
- economic abuse
- online abuse
- threats and intimidation
- emotional abuse
- sexual abuse
- honour based violence
- technical abuse

## WHAT SIGNS TO LOOK FOR

If you believe that you or someone else could be a victim of domestic abuse, there are signs that you can look out for including:

- being withdrawn, or being isolated from family and friends
- having bruises, burns or bite marks
- having finances controlled, or not being given enough to buy food or pay bills
- not being allowed to leave the house, or stopped from going to college or work
- having your internet or social media use monitored, or someone else reading your texts, emails or letters
- being repeatedly belittled, put down or told you are worthless
- being pressured into sex
- being told that abuse is your fault, or that you're overreacting

## YOU ARE NOT ALONE - HELP AND SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

Call the National Domestic Abuse Helpline for free and confidential advice, 24 hours a day on 0808 2000 247.

If you believe there is an immediate risk of harm to you or someone, or it is an emergency, you should always call 999.

# 5 TIPS ON MODELLING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Stress is our natural reaction to situations or events that put us under pressure. Being a positive role model for our children is easier said than done. The feelings we get when we find it hard to cope with high demands and difficult circumstances can lead to stress and conflict. Remember no parent is perfect and we each have some unhealthy habits we could do without.

Your influence as a parent is powerful and lasts well into adulthood.

## 1. Respectful relationships – Be kind to others (even in conflict)

Modelling healthy and caring behaviour towards those you're in relationships with teaches your kids to do the same.

## 2. Actions speak louder than your words

Remember that our kids are always watching and learning from us and while what you tell them is important, your example and actions speak louder than your words. What you do is like a ‘blueprint’ for your children’s behaviour, and they often copy it. For example; how you cope with emotions, manage stress, deal with others, resolve arguments and conflict, take care of yourself, and more.

## 3. Expressing emotions

Children can have a hard time dealing with lots of feelings each day. You can help your children learn how to cope with stress and resolve conflict in a healthy way. For example; find moments in your day to share your thoughts through fun chat, play and read activities and create healthy behaviours. Include your children, even the under 5’s in family discussions and encourage them to share their views. This teaches them that their opinions matter. Also, apologising when you make mistakes shows them that mistakes are part of being human and one should own up to them.

## 4. A healthy lifestyle and daily routines

Our kids learn unhealthy lifestyle habits from us. Having a structure helps us cope with stressful times and manage uncomfortable emotions. Start early and teach your children how to make healthy decisions for their wellbeing and mental health. Eat well, exercise, get fresh air and try to stick to a consistent sleep routine.

## 5. Alcohol and other drugs

Set a good example by modelling safe, responsible and moderate drinking habits.

# WELLNESS HABITS FOR SELF-CARE

Having a structure helps us cope with stressful times and manage uncomfortable emotions. Creating a daily routine allows you to manage your time and makes us feel that we are in control and doing something useful. A family plan can be very helpful in times of stress and uncertainty.

**Eat healthily** - Eating at set times is helpful with setting routines. Create a weekly meal plan to ensure your family is eating at least five fruit and vegetables daily to boost your immune systems and mental health. Avoid turning to food for emotional comfort. Eating at set times is helpful with setting routines.

**Exercise** - You don't need to go to the gym to exercise. For those of you who are physically able to exercise - you should. Exercise gets rid of toxins and releases endorphins which helps with mood and boosts your wellbeing. You can use your stairs, a can of beans as weights, your bed and your floor to help do your exercise.

**Fresh air** - In current climate, if you can utilise a garden or park area then you should do so, if you don't have the physical ground then open a window and breath in fresh air or take a walk around your neighbourhood.

**Sleep** - Lack of good quality sleep can increase stress levels. Overall, sleep quality and quantity are vital for restoring our body, mind and emotions. Keep a consistent sleep schedule, try and get at least 7 hours of sleep.

**Breath** - Slowing down your breath is a proven way to reduce stress. There are many breathing exercises you can practice. For example; inhale through your nose for a count of 5, hold for a count of 4, and exhale out of your mouth (as if you're signing with relief) for a count of 7 or longer. Repeat for at least 90 seconds.

**Mindfulness meditation** - Meditation can help you focus your mind and calm your thoughts. There are many ways to meditate, explore different methods and find one that suits you.

**Hobby** - Is there something that you've always wanted to do but never had the time to do it? Starting a hobby is creative and will pleasantly challenge you and stimulate your mind in new ways.

# TIPS FOR IMPROVING SELF ESTEEM

- Say STOP to your inner critic
- Use healthier motivation habits
- Take a two-minute self-appreciation break
- Each evening, write down three things that you can appreciate about yourself
- Do the right thing
- Fight against perfectionism
- Handle mistakes and failures in a more positive way
- Be kinder towards other people
- Try something new
- Stop falling into the comparison trap
- Spend more time with supportive people (and less time with destructive people)

# EXERCISE FOR THE MIND

## THINK YOUR BEST THOUGHTS

Be aware that babies and children can pick up on anxiety. Even if babies and young children are not directly exposed to conflict, they can recognise and be affected by stress, anxiety and worry in the adults and older children they live with. This will take its toll on them, even if they do not yet have the ability to put this into words. Be mindful of this when expressing your feelings when children are present. Reassure children that you are here to keep them safe.

It is fundamentally important that you take the time to think about what you're thinking about and correct immediately if those thoughts take you in a downward spiral.

Take time to relax in a comfortable space and practice positive affirmations, envisage a better and more positive future and learn to appreciate yourself in your personal time of meditation.

Taking the time to feel gratitude, it may improve your emotional well-being by helping you cope with stress and uncertainty. Whilst it may not appear as obvious, there are always reasons to be grateful. Developing an attitude of gratitude in difficult times helps with your emotional hygiene, it is metaphorically a good scrub down.

Be grateful for things that you may take for granted including your family, friends, neighbours, NHS and simply for the fact that you are alive. If you start with those few things other reasons to be grateful start to flow.

Having this positive psychology allows you to modify your perspective and the psychological payoff resists depression, anxiety and frustration.

The following exercises will help you exercise your mindfulness:

# REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Reflective journaling is a great way to practice self-care and gratitude into your daily life, and it can be done in just a few minutes a day.

Date: .....

The one thing I am grateful for (big or small)

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My favourite moment from today

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List one challenging situation and what you are learning from it

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List one person you are grateful for and why

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What did you learn about yourself today?

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# PERSONAL AFFIRMATIONS

A personal affirmation is a statement you make/create that announces and confirms your future self. You tell this to yourself repeatedly until it becomes a natural aspect of your self talk.

Thinking about strengths. Write an affirmation statement that will boost your confidence and help you feel great about yourself and your future. Fill in the gaps to describe things like the qualities you exhibit, the actions you take, and the attitudes you possess.

I am .....

I radiate .....

I am ready to .....

..... come(s) to me effortlessly and frequently

I deserve to be .....

I am grateful for .....

I let go of .....

I choose to .....

I give myself the gift of .....

..... flows into my life experience in an abundant way

# RETHINK CORE BELIEFS

We often carry negative or false unconscious or semiconscious beliefs, which can have a negative impact on our feelings, our behaviour and our children. In this exercise you must identify four negative core beliefs and then counteract them with reasons why each belief is not true.

Example: **Core belief:** I'm a bad person, I'm too emotional, I'm boring, I'm worthless, I'm too loud, I'm abnormal, I'm not good enough.

**This can't be true because:** I am kind, I enjoy doing things for others, I have good friends, I have talent, I am experienced in my role.

Core belief:

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This can't be true because:

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Core belief:

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This can't be true because:

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Core belief:

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Core belief:

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This can't be true because:

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Core belief:

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This can't be true because:

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# OUR FAMILY CONTRACT

A family contract is an important document. In fact, every member of the family must contribute and agree to its contents and sign it at the bottom!

First discuss your family values - Ask each member of your family questions like what is important to you? With all this information, create a list of promises to each other that can never be broken! Start by putting your family name in the green box below. We've done the first 3 for you.



WE HEREBY MAKE A SOLEMN PROMISE TO OURSELVES AND EACH OTHER TO ALWAYS...

Have love and respect for each other

Always resolve arguments with love and respect

To listen and value everyone's point of view

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# LOOKING FORWARD

What are the three most important things you've learned from doing the activities in the Managing relationships in difficult times kit?

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What aspect(s) do you intend to continue?

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How can you make sure you keep the momentum going?

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# FINALLY - FOR NOW

Managing relationships can be challenging in the best of times, it is no secret realtionships can be impacted negatively in difficult circumstances. Conflict can arise and adversely damage relationships at a time when they need to be the strongest.

Children model their behaviour and as a parent you are possibly their biggest influencer. It is therefore important to practice good behaviour in front of your children and whilst that requires discipline and deliberacy, it is also a good time to do some self assessments to actually see how you are doing.

On our website - <https://theinstituteofwellbeing.com> there is a suite of courses and a wellbeing assessment that can help you to process in order to progress. Give yourself time whilst being kind to yourself. It is important that you are ok, If you are experiencing overwhelming difficulties, please do speak to a healthcare professional or seek counselling at the earliest convenience.

Finally, here are **five** key points:

- Not in front of the children
- Seek for ways to reduce and resolve conflict
- Practice emotional hygiene
- Admit when you are wrong
- Be willing to forgive and move on

All the very best.



Dr. Mike Kelly  
Think well, Live well and Be well.