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Family Focus

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asking, encouraging, complaining, and finally ordering Chris to comply with their requests. Nothing seemed to make a difference. Chris became increasingly defiant and resentful.

Denise and Scott decided to regroup and try a different strategy, a more solution-based approach. They asked Chris when a good time would be for them to talk with him. When they met, both parents talked to Chris about what they appreciated about him and what they missed in their relationship with him. They asked Chris to tell them what he thought they could do or say differently, promising no recriminations. They didn't repeat their complaints. The objective was to promote understanding and good will, not to continue criticizing.

At age 12, Chris didn't want to feel controlled by his parents. When they continually prodded, criticized and complained, Chris only became increasingly alienated. But when his parents sat down with him and treated him with respect by wanting to listen and find a solution together, he responded much better to this approach.

Depending on the level of distrust and resentment a child has developed, this process may need to be repeated several times before he or she is ready to cooperate. Then it is time to hammer out terms of an agreement. One benefit of an agreement is that each party can reference it as a reminder and also avoid going back to square one with anger and recriminations. If the agreement hits a snag, all parties can meet again to determine how they can get back on track. Trying to promote understanding and then forming agreements is a continual work in progress. Children's needs and wishes change as they age, as do parents' expectations.

Forming an agreement is a highly useful tool for couples as well. When there are continuous disagreements on issues such as finances or parenting approaches or in-laws, couples can try to figure out anything that is mutually agreeable and proceed from there. Sometimes having a commitment and agreed-upon approach can provide encouragement and help diffuse anger and resentments.

A couple I worked with, Peter and Natalie, argued often about money issues. They had two young children and both worked full-time. Peter enjoyed being able to spend money on golf, restaurant meals and his valuable coin collection. He acknowledged that he didn't care as much about saving money as Natalie did, and that his goal was to enjoy life. Natalie, on the other hand, worried about finances and wanted to have enough money saved to feel secure.

Natalie felt that Peter wasn't considering her needs when he made independent decisions about spending without consulting her. The more he spent on what Natalie termed indulgences, the more resentful she became. One reason money issues are the number one area of conflict for couples is that we need to make so many decisions related to money. And money can represent various things to each of us - power, control, providing for others, security, excitement, and more.

In my work with couples and families, I often see situations where people have been beating their heads against the wall. This is because we all develop patterns of thought and behavior that cause us to repeat ourselves, despite the realization that it is getting us nowhere. Couples nag and criticize each other about the same old issues. Parents repeat themselves with their children, hoping maybe one day their children will finally put away their toys or do their homework or clean up their rooms without needing to be reminded. Teens often just turn off to their parents rather than participating in arguments that never get resolved.

Sometimes there are deep-seated issues than can only be addressed with ongoing therapy, but often it is possible to handle these impasses within the family. When you are locked into these sorts of battles, it's time to step back and work on forming an agreement. It's a problem-solving approach that involves compromise, but in a way where no one has to lose.

For example, Denise and Scott were highly frustrated with their son, Chris, age 12. Chris had begun to neglect his homework, his room, and his younger brothers.

Instead, he spent most of his time in his room either listening to music or on his iPad. Both parents tried

asking, encouraging, complaining, and finally ordering Chris to comply with their requests. Nothing seemed to make a difference. Chris became increasingly defiant and resentful.

Both Natalie and Peter worked hard and each wanted a say in how their income would be handled. They had a financial advisor and an accountant, but their disagreements over money took a toll and adversely affected their relationship. It was important for this couple to form some agreements regarding their finances so each of them could have their emotional needs met. Peter wanted more fun and excitement, and Natalie wanted more reassurance and financial security. As we worked together, they were able to designate certain amounts of money each month for each of them to handle the way they would like. If either wanted to exceed this amount, they agreed to check with each other first.

As Natalie saw Peter rein in his expenditures for her sake, she felt much more cared for and understood. She was even willing to put some of her share of the monthly amount toward a family vacation fund, and at times to let Peter have a greater amount to spend. For his part, Peter showed that he was willing to limit his spending in order to please Natalie.

Sometimes very simple agreements can promote good will and a closer connection among family members. The idea that each party is willing to make an effort to cooperate is often as important as the actual terms of an agreement. So, if you're feeling stuck in a persistent pattern of conflict, try to find something to agree upon to turn around the negativity and keep building from there.

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[back](#)

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