

Ask your father: How to explain why mummy and daddy are shouting

EMMA COOK gets expert advice on what to do when your child turns to you and asks...

Mummy, why were you and Daddy shouting?

Tara, 9

OK so you've been caught red-handed, in which case the natural response is to feel a jolt of guilt that you've exposed your sweet-natured nine-year-old to the ugliness of adult conflict. But in that moment of panic, don't feel you have to confess too many details. What your child needs at this point is reassurance that he or she was not responsible for the raised voices they overheard and, depending on the level of acrimony, that Mummy and Daddy still love each other.

Ideally, you need to communicate some important truths about arguments while glossing over the minutiae. Denise Knowles, a family counsellor with *Relate*, says: "Put the argument into context. Your nine-year-old doesn't need to know the nitty-gritty. There's no need to burden them in that way. It's important to say that grown-ups argue but they can also make up."

Try to introduce examples in their own lives that they can identify with, such as arguments with siblings and friends, Knowles suggests. Use this as a way of explaining to them that we can all love someone but still not like their point of view or the way they're behaving.

Answering this question confidently can also reassure them that their own feelings of aggression are normal. If you give your child the impression that adult relationships are always harmonious, this could worry a child for different reasons. Susan Quilliam, a relationship psychologist and the author of *Stop Arguing, Start Talking* (Ebury Press, £4.89), explains: "A nine-year-old may want to know that people do feel strongly and it's OK to let your emotions out sometimes; that it's natural, as long as it doesn't go too far."

Although bear in mind, too, that we don't want to overpromote the benefits of shouting. "I think kids need to know they have a range of ways to cope with genuine conflict," says Quilliam. So you could bring in examples where as a family or a couple you have, if possible, agreed on a decision without dispute or raising voices.

At the heart of this question is anger; how you and your partner cope with this tricky emotion and the cues you then give to your children. As Quilliam says: "How to manage those feelings is the issue, not the feeling themselves. It's important to say in so many words, 'When we shout, it's short and sharp, simply to let off steam. Then we talk through the issue and in the end we agree'. So shouting isn't necessarily a bad thing if we bring it to a good conclusion." For Emma's previous columns, go to

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