
Bad moves in resolving conflict

From "The Sixty Minute Marriage Builder" by Rob Parsons

Bad Move #1 – Forget the issue – attack the person

Imagine that Sue has forgotten her son's dental appointment – again. Her husband says, "You forgot again, didn't you?" Now had he left it here, they could have had an argument about why she forgot, but he decides to abandon the issue and attack the person. "You are such a useless wife and mother." It wasn't the first time he had said it and he realized it wasn't right; still, even he didn't know the long-term effects it would have on the relationship.

The principle works the same way with our children. It is constructive to deal with the issue of poor grades and study habits, but very damaging to tell a child, "You are so stupid. Why can't you be more like your sister? You are going to be a loser forever." There seems to be an underlying erroneous belief that shaming someone will shape him or her up, but it never really does in the long run and does a lot of damage to the other person and to the relationship.

Bad Move #2 – Widen the issue

With this one, instead of just arguing over the situation at hand we try to think of other unrelated events to give us a bit more firepower. It goes something like this, "How come you forgot the appointment again? You are such a useless wife and mother." And then "That's why last year's holiday with my mother was a disaster." Now the fascinating thing is the person who has this tactic used against her does not normally say, "What on earth has last year's holiday with your mother got to do with a dental appointment?" No, she widens the argument as well. "Yes, I'm useless. And you're so great you've been passed over for a promotion four times." The fuse is now lit. Stand well back.

Bad Move #3 – Bring out the old mortar bombs

Every marriage has at least six of these hidden away. We bring them out when our back is against the wall and we need some heavy weaponry. They could involve sex, the "Honey do" list, weight, the way we discipline or don't discipline the children. Typical classics will draw on past events with in-laws, holidays, and money. Sometimes we feel ashamed of using them because they are so old, so we preface them with, "You'll never change," or "You always..." or "You never..." Other phrases that freshen them up a little are, "I can never forget when..." or "The problem with you is that you are still..."

Bad Move #4 – Never lose an argument

There is nothing more certain to create terminal conflict in a marriage than one of the partners being brilliant with words. These creatures always have the final say. They have the ability to twist, manipulate, quote expert authority, and generally make you wish you hadn't bothered to start this particular fight. And they really believe they win arguments. What they don't see is what they leave behind – the unresolved anger, the bitterness inside, and a growing resentment of not being able to put your position forward. There is only one hope for such people. They must learn to lose arguments – to understand that winning is normally not nearly as important as it appears to be – to back off a little and give the other person space to say what he or she feels. When we learn to do this, we discover two things. First: conflict gets resolved faster. Second: the day after, we can't even remember what the argument was about.