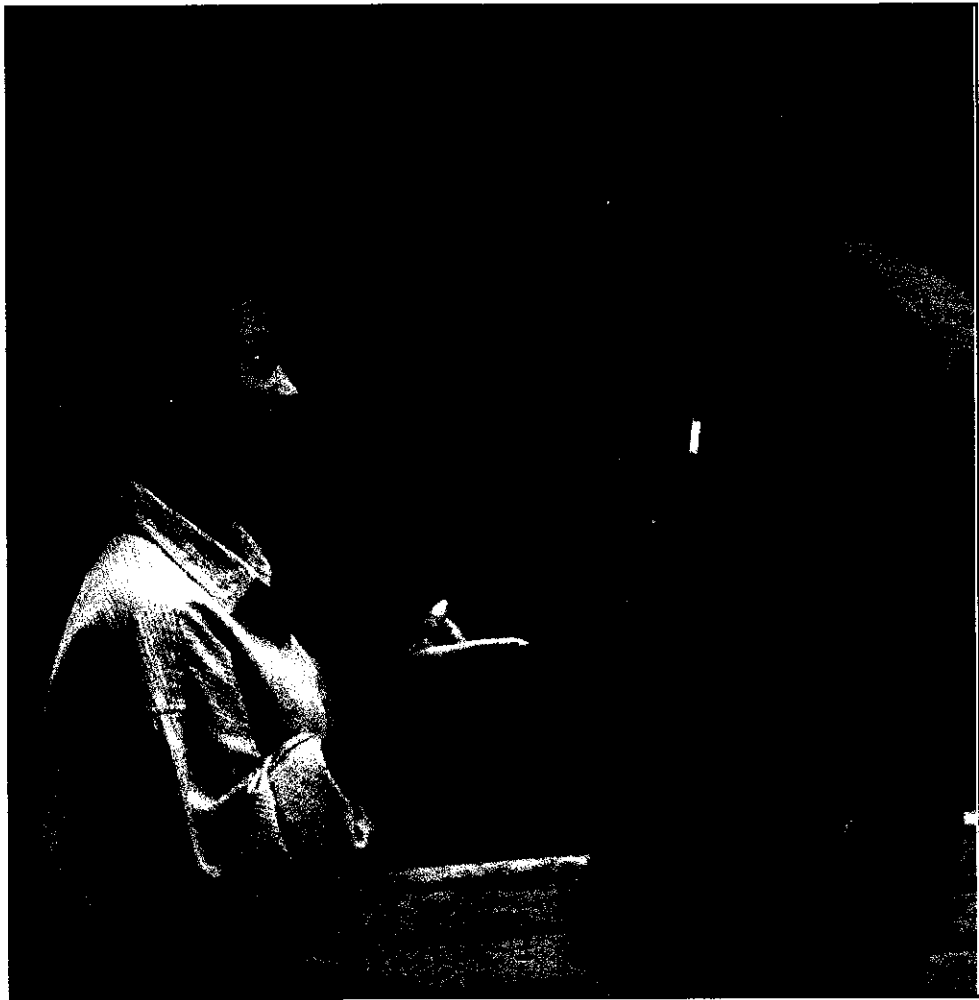


6.

Defuse or Light the Fuse

Taking Control of Conflict



A comment or action provides the spark; a response provides the fuel. What's the result? The greater the size of the argument, like the larger the fire, the greater the destruction it causes.

Though it may have seemed right to fight fire with fire, both parents can get burned. Both become upset from engaging in conflict; both can get hurt from vengeful comments that result and both can be scarred from the legal battles that often follow.

The victim who gets hurt the most is the child caught in the middle. The child doesn't light the match nor does she fuel the fire. Yet she's the innocent victim who's asleep upstairs while the building burns around her. He feels the heat from the argument but he's powerless to control its destructiveness and helpless to extinguish the fire. She's caught in the middle with all exits blocked.

How can the result be different? Taking a clue from our safety classes, we know of several ways to prevent fires:

- Deciding where and when to communicate and what topics are off-limits can prevent many conflicts from starting.
- "Don't play with matches" is a reminder to eliminate the voice tones, body language or specific words that push your co-parent's hot buttons. Discovering your own hot buttons can help you become vigilant when you are feeling the heat.
- And finally, the phrase "Don't add fuel to the fire" will be our model for responding to initial sparks in ways that extinguish the argument altogether. Listening and reflecting can defuse the conflict and "I" Statements can smother the flame.

Either co-parent can prevent an argument; either one can put the fire out. In this chapter you'll learn techniques for prevention and for extinguishing the fire. Destruction caused by the conflict can be prevented and your own child will be the one protected from the searing heat.

Lighting the Fuse

Tone of Voice

An argument, like a fire, can start small. A few words, a tone of voice or even a slight threatening action can light the match that gets the fire going. Sarcasm, threat and whining are three voice tones that push other people's hot buttons. Sarcasm belittles a person and an aggressive tone is just as meaningful as an aggressive act. Even a whiny voice can elicit anger by drawing the other person in with its pleading sound. Any voice tone that blames or is accusatory also lights the match of conflict. And a tone that commands or demands usually begets a response that is just as demanding. Are these the sounds that set your co-parent off? Are any of these tones the ones that you respond to with defensiveness or with anger? Tone of voice can carry as much of the message as the actual words. So you can start a fight with your voice even when your words are not the problem.

Body Language

Body language is another way we communicate. And it, too, can be the match that sets an argument burning. Body language can be threatening even when one doesn't push, shove or prevent another's free movement. Jabbing your finger toward someone's face, getting too



in this chapter, you'll learn exactly how to do that, but for now, just become aware of the ways you most easily get drawn into a conflict. Which of the ways that people "Light the Fuse" bother you the most? You already identified your triggers in the previous chapter. Now think of them as your "hot buttons."

Write two or three examples in the spaces below. These are your personal hot buttons.

When someone pushes your hot button it is likely that you will have one of three overreactions:

- 1) Defensiveness
- 2) Counterattack
- 3) Withdrawal

These reactions fuel the fire.

Defensiveness

Your first thoughts perhaps were like these: "I am too a good parent." "I am too able to talk rationally." "I am not always late." "This is not a dead-end job." "I care just as much as you about our child." Defensive, argumentative—these responses get you caught in the fire. When you throw this fuel on the fire, you've allowed someone else to draw you into the fight. Someone else has dangled out a fishing line and you've let yourself get hooked. Someone else has laid a trap and you've gone for the bait and got caught instead.

Counterattack

A second way to walk right into the fire is to counterattack. This is what it sounds like: "Maybe I'm not a perfect parent, but you're worse." "Maybe you think I am irrational, but you're pathetic." "I'm not always on time, but you can't keep up with the child support." "I care about our child more than you do—at least she laughs when she's with me. When she's with you, she's just bored."

There are a thousand ways to counterattack and each one adds fuel to the argument's fire. Counterattack invites further attack, and so the argument builds. The co-parent is caught by entering the trap. The hook is dangled and you grab the bait. Now the fight can really begin. Punch, counterpunch; attack, counterattack. The argument builds; the fire burns brighter. Soon, it's out of control and destruction is all around.

Withdrawal

The third way to fuel the fire is to walk away or hang up on someone. However, there are times when it is appropriate to discontinue a conversation that is nonproductive or abusive. When your children are present or within ear shot, it is not only appropriate, but also important to discontinue hostile interactions. To determine when it is appropriate to limit or discontinue a discussion, simply consider your motive. If you withdraw to push you co-parent's "hot buttons", or because you are unable or unwilling to address an issue, your



What

Selecting the topic is your next decision. Some topics are out of bounds; some are within limits. It may depend on your goal.

Goal: To air your opinion.

If your goal is to air your opinion, then any topic that impacts your child is within your boundaries. However, you need to be sure that your goal is just to offer your opinion and not to force or persuade your co-parent to share the same opinion. You may prefer your co-parent to share your opinion and believe the result is in your child's best interests, but you can't control your co-parent's reaction. You may want to explain why you believe a TV show is unhealthy for your child, but your co-parent may still choose to follow a different course of action within his/her own house.

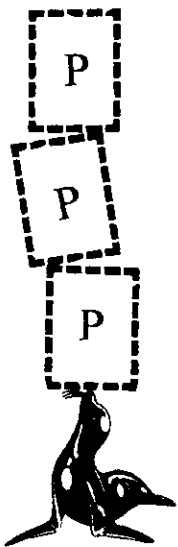
Goal: To set your own boundaries.

If your co-parent is infringing on your own choices, you may need an opportunity to set your boundaries. You can ask for a meeting to firmly explain your limits. Here's one example: Your co-parent provides child support for the children. Lately your co-parent has been interfering in the way you spend the money, both advising you and your child as to how the funds should be spent. You call a meeting and firmly but unemotionally explain your limits to this action: You are responsible for the managing the funds and you tell your co-parent that you will no longer require his or her well-meaning advice.

Goal: To solve a problem.

The third kind of goal involves child-related problems that need to be solved. Perhaps the child's grades have dropped or his behavior at school is a problem. Maybe her athletic schedule requires new demands or his use of the car needs some common decisions. When the solution aims to improve the child's life (rather than the parent's position), it's usually a topic for common discussion.

To ensure successful discussions, use the guidelines of The 3 P's.



- **Focus on the present, not the past.** Any mention of problems or habits in the past is a sure way to start a defensive argument, so avoid it. Start every new discussion with a clean sheet of paper expecting the current discussion to go well.
- **Focus on the problem, not on the person.** Keep talking about safety issues, and homework conditions rather than “the things you allow at your house.” Use language that talks about what's good for the child rather than what you don't like about the co-parent. The problem is the problem. Keep the problem at the center of the discussion and the child at the center of the solution.
- **Focus on the one problem at hand, not the whole universe.** Don't try to change the world. Ask for an appointment to discuss a single topic. And discuss only that topic. When the conversation moves away from the topic, say, “Yes, that's important too, but right now let's focus on this topic.” If you succeed in handling one topic, stop. Don't keep talking until you have an argument. Allow yourselves to experience success and



but they leave a person vulnerable and the speaker in a position of superiority. (I know something you don't know.) And so, like the other "You" statements above, they instigate defensiveness as the person protects his or her self-esteem.

Tone of Voice

Tone of voice by itself can

insult
criticize
demand

It can also relay

sarcasm
aggression
disrespect



If the tone of voice is disrespectful, it forces someone to go on the attack or on the defensive until they've regained their equality. If the person is in a one-down position, he won't communicate until he feels that once again he's on an equal footing. And he won't be able to surrender to another person's request until the position is righted. So using a tone of voice to put someone down or threaten only delays the time that they'll be able to solve a problem or change a course of action that's hurting their child. It directs the focus to the relationship between the two people and away from the problem at hand. It prevents any focus staying on the child.

Body Language

Most of us were never taught anything about how we communicate through body language. However, it's been shown that we communicate as much or more of the message through our body movements and facial expressions as we do through our words. This is often why children are so in tune to the real situation even though parental words tell a different story. A disapproving look, rolling eyes, an aggressive body stance can start a fight just as easily as an insulting remark.

To avoid playing with matches, it's important to start monitoring your own body mechanics and becoming aware of those minor actions that disrupt communication. If the wrong words, tone of voice and body mechanics can start an argument, then the right words, tone of voice and body language can avoid one. If it's your own child who's asleep upstairs when the fire starts, ask yourself if it's worth the effort to avoid playing with matches.

Playing with matches can seem like an exciting and risky venture. However, the result is a loss of focus on the child and the chance that everyone will get burned. Even if you're committed to never starting a fire, you need to know how to replace offending words and actions with ones that are less provocative. We'll focus on what to do in the remainder of this chapter.

Throwing Fuel on the Fire



The match is lit; you're feeling the heat. How do you respond? Do you imagine the worst and consider every statement an attack? Do you intentionally ignore the question and leave the area? Do you lurch toward defending yourself? (I am not always late!) Do you launch a counterattack? (Even when I'm on time, you never have Alex ready!) Remember that any of these comebacks add fuel to the fire. They all turn your co-parent's initial words, tone of voice or look into a full-fledged argument. One person can't argue alone.



5. Listen and Reflect

When your co-parent has handed you a lighted match, your job is to put out the fire. There's an image that comes out of the 1970s that's useful to consider. When Vietnam demonstrators were confronted by their own national guardsmen, several put flowers in the barrels of the guardsmen's rifles. What do you think was the effect? National guardsmen could not easily turn their firepower on young men and women armed with flowers. It took the fire out of their bellies, so to speak. Let's see how this applies to co-parents.

When a co-parent drops a "You" statement on you, listen between the lines for the concern hidden there and reflect the concern back to the speaker. For example, "You're not good at parenting" can be reflected back as, "You're concerned that I won't make good decisions concerning our son."

Reflecting doesn't mean that you agree with the speaker or even with the concern behind the speaker's statement. And it doesn't mean that you defend your position. A reflective statement only rephrases what the speaker believes and shows you're listening. Let's see some other examples.

"You're always late," can be reflected by saying, "You're unhappy when I arrive later than scheduled."

"You should leave that dead-end job," can be reflected by saying, "You're concerned that I can't progress in this job."

Even a statement like "You're really a jerk" can be reflected with "You don't like the way I make decisions," or "You don't agree with the way I lead my life."

Reflecting statements won't immediately end a confrontation. It may take some winding down with your reflecting back three or four consecutive statements made by the speaker. But it will immediately reduce the level of the conflict because reflecting shows that you are carefully listening to the speaker's underlying concerns. If you can help identify the concern, you may be able to extinguish the flame. Everybody likes being listened to and understood. As author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey says, "They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Show your understanding of the other person's concern and then, even if you disagree, you'll have that person's respect.

6. "I" Statements

"You" statements are like a first attack. In turn, they invite defensiveness or a counteroffensive. Either way they're guaranteed to start an argument. How do you share your opinions, your thoughts or respond to someone else without using a "you" statement? Instead of starting a sentence with "You," start it instead with "I."

This is what it looks like:

"I feel/felt _____ (insert feeling word)
when _____ (this happens)
and what I'd like is _____ (insert your request)"



Example #2.

I feel concerned when Alison doesn't do her homework at your house, because she needs structure in both homes or she may not pass her subjects. And what I'd like is for you to monitor her work.

What do you think of the idea?

The "I" statement helps to keep the problem focused on the child. It clearly changes the focus from what "I" want to what's good for the child.

The last question invites agreement or commitment. However, don't expect agreement immediately. It may take a little time for your co-parent to agree. Don't press for an answer right after you've delivered the "I" statement. Your co-parent may need to say, "I'll think about it," even if he/she agrees in order to save face. Follow up by saying, "Great. I'll call you on Friday to find out what you're thinking."

You can also use an "I" statement when you need to set boundaries. This is what that sounds like:

I feel hurt and angry when you call me irresponsible. What I'd like is for you to only give me constructive criticism but never in front of our child.

Will you do that?

Dual Responsibility

You can start an argument. You can stop one from developing. Avoid playing with matches by controlling your own tone of voice, words and body language. Keep clear of your co-parent's hot buttons; you know which ones they are.

If an argument does get started, avoid throwing fuel on the fire. Instead, use STP-A to stop and think about the effect on your child if you enter the fray. Then, rather than defending yourself or starting a counteroffensive, listen to the speaker and reflect back his or her hidden concerns. An "I" statement delivered with controlled voice and body mechanics keeps the focus on the needs of your child and limits the size and number of conflicts. You'll keep yourself and your child out of the burning building.





DESCRIPTIVE FEELINGS

Directions: Post this list somewhere you and your child can see it, such as on your refrigerator. Practice identifying your feelings in front of your child and encourage your child to do the same. As you develop your feelings vocabulary, add other feelings words to this list.

FEELING WORDS LIST					
PLEASANT FEELINGS			UNPLEASANT FEELINGS		
alive	amused	accepted	annoyed	afraid	anxious
affectionate	alert	adequate	agitated	angry	aggressive
assured	blest	brave	aggravated	abused	blue
bold	buoyant	cocky	bitter	betrayed	bored
cheerful	content	caring	confused	crushed	down
calm	casual	confident	distracted	disappointed	dissatisfied
capable	competent	encouraged	depressed	disgruntled	exhausted
empathetic	expectant	excited	envious	embarrassed	frustrated
energetic	ecstatic	fascinated	frightened	hurt	helpless
fortunate	fine	friendly	horrible	hopeless	insecure
glad	determined	great	infuriated	ill	incompetent
good	goofy	gutsy	irritated	livid	lost
hopeful	happy	high	miffed	mean	nervous
humble	joyful	intense	outraged	offended	provoked
important	loving	optimistic	possessive	pushed	peevd
overjoyed	playful	peaceful	putout	rage	rejected
pleased	proud	positive	remorse	resentful	stunned
powerful	relaxed	refreshed	shaky	stupid	sullen
relieved	sincere	secure	sad	spiteful	tense
silly	satisfied	snappy	ticked off	timid	tired
snappy	surprised	sympathetic	trapped	unamused	useless
successful	sassy	thankful	uneasy	vengeful	inadequate
thrilled	warm & fuzzy	wonderful	worn	worried	weary





‘LIGHTING THE FUSE’

HOSTILITY + HOSTILITY = GREATER HOSTILITY

Directions: Read the following examples and predict the possible outcome. Then take each situation and attempt to be the responding parent. Create a better outcome by de-escalating the conflict. Use the dos and don'ts listed on the activity page titled “Taking Control of Conflict” as your guide.

Example #1.



Mother: ‘Why can’t you ever get our daughter home on time? I always have to be the responsible one! I think you run late on purpose just to annoy me. You are so passive-aggressive! You must enjoy making us rush at bedtime!’

Father: “Right, YOU’RE the responsible one! Ha! What a laugh. You can’t even balance your checkbook! Get off my back. I’ll get her home when I can! You always like to control things, don’t you?”

Identify the ways the father chose to create greater hostility:

Using your skills, take the role of the father, and DEFUSE the above situation.

Father:





DEFUSE WITH “I” STATEMENTS

Directions: Read the examples and convert them to “I” statements. Use the format

“I feel _____
When _____
Because _____
And what I’d like is _____.”

1. “I can’t believe you! You promised you would be on time for a change, and you forgot again! I can’t trust you to do anything right!”

2. “You are so darn controlling! I can’t believe what you are doing to the children. You are not supposed to pump them for information about me or my boyfriend! Just because you are jealous and lonely, don’t take it out on the poor kids! If you don’t stop doing stuff like this, I’ll call my attorney!”





5. "I am not going to send good clothes anymore because you will not ever return them!. You are just playing games again. The judge said you are to stop these maneuvers."

6. "You won't ever answer the phone when I call. I know you have caller ID and I bet you are standing there pretending you are not home. Why can't I just talk to my kids?!"



DEFUSE WITH LIMITS ACTIVITY

Directions: Rewrite each of the comments to reflect limit-setting behaviors and statements.

1. "I hate when you start yelling at me when I am dropping off our daughter. Can't you see how upset you are making her? Please don't do this; don't be difficult. Please, please... just stop yelling at me!"

2. "You called to talk to Jeffrey, so why are you always asking to talk to me? I've told you before that I don't want to talk with you! Please don't put him into the middle. No, I don't want to discuss that either. Why are you pushing this?"

3. "He is coming home with me; it's supposed to be my day anyhow! What do you mean he can't come with me? How dare you! He is coming with me right now, so get out of our way! Don't try to stop me!" (You grab your child from the other parent. Your child looks anxious and confused. Your child begins to cry).

