

## How to Walk Away from a Fight With Your Child

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You've probably heard these words of advice before: "Just walk away when your child is trying to pull you into a fight."

Kids argue with their parents all the time and, in many cases, it's tolerable and normal. But when your child becomes disrespectful, starts to yell, or swear, or becomes irate and won't calm down, you need to disengage. You need to walk away and refuse to discuss things further with your child until he or she can discuss things respectfully.

Indeed, turning around and walking away from an argument or a fight with your child *is* one of the most effective ways as a parent to put an end to a fight.

But what should you do when your child won't let you walk away? What if your child follows you to your room and won't let you disengage from the fight? What if your child is relentless?

### Why Kids Try To Prolong the Argument

Disengaging and refusing to argue is one of the best ways to stop power struggles and arguments. But many kids—particularly defiant, oppositional ones—will follow their parents around, prolonging the argument. Why do they do this? Don't they hate the fighting as much as you do?

When you walk away or stop participating in an argument, you send your child the message that you're in control. Though they aren't consciously aware of all of this, they feel the power shift from them to you. You control the situation when you walk away. You win when you walk away—and they don't want you to win.

So, they try to pull you back into the argument to regain control—to ensure that you don't win. They will try almost anything to keep it going, whether it's calling you names, throwing things, punching a hole in the wall, or slamming a door.

If they can do something that gets you to react, they feel a whole lot better. And in many cases, they know that if they push all the right buttons, you just might give in to get relief from the torment.

The key is to know how to prevent your child from dragging you back into the fight. Here are some tips to do just that.

### When Your Child Follows You Into Your Room to Continue the Argument

Here's the trick: once you walk away, say no more. Lock the door if you have to and ride out the storm. Even if your child is screaming outside your door or pounding on it with all their might, ignore them.

*Do whatever you can to cope until they've calmed down.*

The second you turn that doorknob to tell them to stop, you've given them what they wanted. So put on some headphones, turn up the TV, read a book, knit. Do whatever you have to do to focus your attention away from your child's behavior.

If they damage something or call you foul names while they're pounding on your door, give them consequences afterward, when they've calmed down. And stick to the consequences.

In other words, ignore their attempts to pull you in when you're disengaging from them, but hold them accountable for anything they damage (or rules they break) later.

### **When Your Child Trashes Her Room to Get Your Attention Back**

If your child goes to her room and starts to throw things around or screams at the top of her lungs about what a jerk you are or how much she hates you, let her.

If she breaks something of her own, that's a natural consequence she should face. She will have to buy a replacement on her own. If she makes a mess of the room, she will have to clean it up when things calm down. If she damages the walls, she will have to pay for the repair.

As a rule, it's most effective to focus on controlling your behavior and emotions rather than your child's because here's the truth: you don't control your child's behavior, so don't try to. The best you can do is hold her accountable for her actions.

### **How to End Phone and Text Message Arguments**

If the argument is over the phone or via text message, tell your child that you're done with the discussion, and you will not reply anymore. Then, follow through. Turn the phone off and get involved with something else. You can finish talking later when things are calm again.

If she keeps sending messages, just ignore them. You don't even have to read them. And try not to be shocked or take personally the things she says. Just know that an irate teen may say anything to drag you back into the fight—to regain control. Don't take the bait.

### **How to End Arguments When You're Driving**

The car is one of the most difficult places to get into an argument with your child. The first rule is, pull over if you can. You may not be able to walk away, but you might be able to step outside the car to get some fresh air if it's safe to do so.

Tell your child you're not going to continue until they calm down because it's not safe for you to drive while they're verbally abusing you or being disruptive. Then, find something to do that will help you cope—your smartphone is perfect in these situations. Read the news, listen to some music, or read this article again!

### **When You Can't Walk Away Because You're Busy**

Let's say, for example, that you're cooking dinner and you really can't walk away. Focus your attention on the task at hand, not your child. Avoid eye contact and ignore any comments he makes under his breath.

Find some sort of mental task to occupy your mind, such as counting or singing a song to yourself in your head. If you have a relatively compliant child who will go to his room when asked, you can tell him to do so. But if your child is defiant, he will probably refuse.

If you can't make him go to his room, the best alternative is to ignore him. Don't give his behavior any power. Control what you can—and that's you.

## **When Your Child Blocks or Clings to You**

Being blocked or clung to is perhaps the most difficult situation to find yourself in when you try to walk away from a fight. If this happens, stay calm, use a normal tone of voice, and tell your child this behavior is not okay.

Then tell them to go do something else to calm down. They're probably going to continue their blocking and clinging—at least at first. Remain calm and wait it out. Yes, this might mean that you literally stand there and wait for some time.

You can let your child know that they need to stop or there will be a consequence later. If your child is not blocking your path, try your best to go about your business—do the dishes, read a book, or browse your phone. The goal is to find some sort of task to focus on, so your attention is not on your child's behavior.

## **When Your Child Threatens You or Becomes Abusive**

If you feel physically threatened by your child, you might decide to call the police. Or, if your child is being incredibly destructive to your home, it might be a good idea to call the police instead of trying to stop him yourself. Gauge the situation and don't put yourself or other members of your family at risk.

Also, to be clear, we do not recommend calling the police simply because your child is being defiant. That's not what the police are for. The police are not for helping you parent your child. The police are for protecting you, your family, and your property from violence and threats.

Oftentimes, we suggest that parents call the non-emergency number for their local police department ahead of time to discuss how they would handle these kinds of situations if you should call them for assistance. This way, you have an idea of what you'd be getting into and you can make an informed decision.

## **Don't Walk Away From Young Children or Children With Disabilities**

For children who are pre-school age or younger, or who have developmental delays or disabilities, walking away as described in this article may not be effective and is not recommended.

Disengaging and moving too far away from a child at this developmental level may cause extreme anxiety. If this is the case with your child, it might be better to try to stay close—within your child's sight. It can be really helpful to say something like this:

*"You're so upset. I wish I could help you calm down. Why don't you..."*

And then suggest a calming activity for them to do. This might be looking at a book, playing some music they like, or playing with a favourite toy. You can model how to stay calm, and you can disengage without leaving the room altogether.

## **Other Techniques to Help You Walk Away From an Argument**

Before you walk away, it's always helpful to set a limit with your child and attempt to redirect them. For example, say this to your child:

*"I'm going to go take a break. You should go listen to some music or do something to calm down."*

Or you can say:

*“Yelling at me isn’t going to get you what you want. When you calm down, we can talk more. I’ll check on you in 15 minutes and see if you’re ready.”*

Also, if there are younger kids in the home, take them with you when you walk away so they don’t become a target or a pawn that your defiant child can use to pull you back into the argument.

For older kids in the home, ask them to go to their rooms until your angry child calms down. The smaller the audience your defiant child has, the better.

### **Will My Child Ever Stop Banging on My Door?**

It has been shown that, over time, when a behavior is no longer reinforced or rewarded, it will eventually fade away. This is referred to as *extinction*, a behaviour modification for reducing problematic behaviour in children by behavioural psychologists.

To put it another way, if the behavior doesn’t get what it needs to survive—your attention—it will eventually cease to exist. The key to getting bad behaviours to become extinct is to be consistent. To be sure, if you continue to feed the behavior, even just once in a while, the behavior will continue to return.

It takes a lot of time, energy, and practice to walk away from arguments. And it can be exhausting. But with mindful practice, you can learn to consistently ignore your child’s attempts to pull you back into the argument after you’ve disengaged.

Over time your kids will see that you mean it when you walk away—and they will learn they can’t pull you back in. This change in your response will lead your child to adapt—to find new and more appropriate ways of behaving.