

Disagreeing without a fight

Moderate · 15 min to prepare · Free

Raise it early, in private, at a time that works for both of you. Talk about the behavior, not the person, using an "I" statement: how you feel, what happened, why it matters and what you need. Then really listen to their side, look for a fix where each of you gives something and gets something, and take a break if it heats up. A neutral third person can help when you're stuck.

YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ A calm moment and a private place
- ☐ One sentence about what you want from the conversation

DO IT LIKE THIS

- 1 **Don't let it simmer.** If you notice something's wrong, don't ignore it. A problem addressed early has a better chance of being worked out.
- 2 **Know your goal.** Decide clearly and specifically what you want to get out of the conversation.
- 3 **Pick the moment.** Talk in private, face to face rather than by text, and confirm it's a good time for both of you. People who feel rushed or blindsided communicate worse. Not when either of you is hungry, tired or already angry.
- 4 **Use an "I" statement with four parts: how you feel, the specific behavior, why it matters to you, and what you need.** Example: "I feel stressed when dishes sit in the sink overnight, because I cook breakfast early. Can we agree to wash them before bed?"
- 5 **Describe the behavior, not their character.** Labels like "lazy" or "selfish" make people defensive. Drop "always" and "never" too.
- 6 **Listen to their side.** Give each person a chance to say what they think the problem is. Paraphrase before you answer: "So it sounds like the noise isn't the issue, it's the timing".
- 7 **Find a fix both of you can live with.** Look at both sides' needs before proposing a solution. It will probably involve each person giving something and getting something, and it may not be ideal, just better than now.

Watch out Don't fire back. When you're criticized, the natural reaction is to criticize back, but that compounds the problem. Listen for what's underneath instead. Venting at full blast escalates anger rather than resolving anything.

DAD NOTE *You're not trying to win. You're trying to fix the thing.*

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/people/conflict-without-damage/disagreeing-without-a-fight/

Checked October 2, 2026. Sources: St. Norbert College; Santa Clara University Office of the Ombuds; Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley; American Psychological Association.