

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My teenage son and my husband fight constantly about politics. From large-scale national issues – like whether the United States should go to war with Iraq -- to the local concerns – like our county Land Use Plan -- they don't agree on a single thing. They interrupt each other, and scream, and almost every dinner ends with one of them leaving the table in a swearing rage. All of this gives me a stomachache, and I've had enough. Advice?

-- Alice

Dear Alice,

The problem here is not that your husband and son have different views, it's that they are not respectful of each other's positions or each other's right to differ on subjects that are obviously important to both of them.

Leaving aside your indigestion for the moment, I must say that I find it refreshing to know that political discourse still happens at some American family dinner tables. It is nice to know that people care enough about important issues to have an opinion. So many families eat with the TV blaring, or with conversations that don't go much beyond "Pass the salt, please."

We're living in challenging times, and good, intelligent people can be expected to have very different views about how to deal with our complex world. Thomas Jefferson once said that it is impossible to be both free and ignorant. He was right, and we all have a civic responsibility to be informed, express our opinions, and stand up for our beliefs. So, that's the good news – freedom of speech is alive and well at your family table.

The bad news is that what you describe is not a healthy debate; both of these guys are talking at the same time, and neither seems to be listening. Someone once said that these kinds of discussions are not really about talking and listening. They're about talking and "waiting to talk." In your household, no one seems to even "wait to talk." Dad/son just bursts in with his own point of view. There are clear rules for a debate, and when they're followed, the debaters don't have apoplectic fits, and the audience is not nauseous.

It might be interesting for your husband and son to check out information about how to have a constructive and healthy difference of opinion. One website that I particularly like describes the "decorum" expected in the U.S. House of Representatives: http://www.house.gov/rules/house_decorum.htm. If Representatives Trent Lott and Nancy Pelosi can find ways to respectfully disagree, while expressing their viewpoints, but *without* turning over desks and swearing at each other as they run screaming out of the Capitol, then I hold out great hope that your family can do the same.

The rules of healthy debate require listening respectfully to the other's viewpoint, and avoiding inferences about another's personal intents, motives, or personality. Of course, the U.S. Congress asks its members to refrain from profane or vulgar language. They also require that members wear proper business attire and refer to each other by the name of their state ("Will the good gentleman from the great state of North Carolina

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please pass the salt?”). I don’t think these last two rules need apply at your dinner table, but the others offer excellent guidelines.

Let these two gentlemen from the great state of North Carolina know that you are over this. Tell them that you respect their rights to hold strong opinions and, in fact, you’re proud of them for thinking about the important issues that affect all of you. But make it clear that you are unwilling to experience any more dyspepsia from their rants.

Who knows? If they begin to actually listen to each other, they might each learn something, change, or expand their viewpoint. And they will have learned the rules and skills of healthy debate. These can be applied beyond the dinner table and beyond politics, to any aspect of life — one’s job, school, and marriage — where good people respectfully hold different opinions.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) www.fullpotentialliving.com