How to Teach a Child to Argue

Why would any sane parent teach his kids to talk back? Because, this father found, it actually increased family harmony.

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Those of you who don’t have perfect children will find this familiar: Just as I was withdrawing money in a bank lobby, my 5-year-old daughter chose to throw a temper tantrum, screaming and writhing on the floor while a couple of elderly ladies looked on in disgust. (Their children, apparently, had been perfect.) I gave Dorothy a disappointed look and said, “That argument won’t work, sweetheart. It isn’t pathetic enough.”

She blinked a couple of times and picked herself up off the floor, pouting but quiet.

“What did you say to her?” one of the women asked.

I explained that “pathetic” was a term used in rhetoric, the ancient art of argument. I had happened across the subject one rainy day in a library and become instantly obsessed. As a result Dorothy had learned almost from birth that a good persuader doesn’t merely express her own emotions; she manipulates her audience. Me, in other words.

Under my tutelage in the years that followed, Dorothy and her younger brother, George, became keenly, even alarmingly, persuasive. “Well, whatever it was,” the woman said, “it certainly worked.” Sure it did. I’ve worked hard at making my kids good at arguing. Absolutely.

Why on earth would any parent want that? Because persuasion is powerful. Rhetoric originated in the lawsuits of ancient Greece, when citizens who weren’t good at persuading could lose their houses — or their lives. It was a staple of education until the early 1800s, teaching society’s elite how to debate, make public decisions, and reach consensus. It probably explains how the founding fathers managed to carve a nation out of 13 squabbling colonies.

And let’s face it: Our culture has lost the ability to usefully disagree. Most Americans seem to avoid argument. But this has produced passive aggression and groupthink in the office, red and blue states, and families unable to discuss things as simple as what to watch on television. Rhetoric doesn’t turn kids into back-sassers; it makes them think about other points of view.

I had long equated arguing with fighting, but in rhetoric they are very different things. An argument is good; a fight is not. Whereas the goal of a fight is to dominate your opponent, in an argument you succeed when you bring your audience over to your side. A dispute over territory in the backseat of a car qualifies as an argument, for example, in the unlikely event that one child attempts to *persuade* his audience rather than slug it.

George, who took longer than Dorothy did to talk, was at first a devotee of what rhetoricians call argument by the stick. After every fight I’d ask him, “Did you get the other kid to agree with you?” For years he considered that a thoroughly stupid question, and maybe it was. But eventually this question made sense to him: In the world of rhetoric, argument by the stick is no argument. It never persuades, it only inspires revenge. To disagree reasonably, a child must learn the three basic tools of argument. I got them straight from Aristotle, hence the Greek labels: **logos, ethos, and pathos.** Logos is argument by logic. If arguments were children, logos would be the brainy one, the big sister who gets top grades in high school. Forcing my kids to be logical forced them to connect what they wanted with the reasons they gave.

“Mary won’t let me play with the car.”

“Why should she?”

“Because she’s a pig.”

“So Mary should give you the car because she’s a pig?”

Repeat the kid’s premise (she’s being a pig) with her conclusion (therefore she should let me play with the car), and she has to think logically. Ethos, or argument by character, employs the persuader’s personality, reputation, and ability to look trustworthy. (While logos sweats over its GPA, ethos gets elected class president.) My kids learned early on that a sterling reputation is more than just good; it’s persuasive. In rhetoric, lying isn’t just a foul because it’s wrong, it’s a foul because it’s unpersuasive. A parent is more likely to believe a trustworthy kid and to accept her argument. For example, if both children — the entire list of suspects — deny having eaten the last cookie, ethos becomes important.

Me: “One of you took the cookie.”

Dorothy: “Have I ever stolen cookies before?”

Me: “Good point. George?”

Then there’s pathos, argument by emotion.It’s the sibling who gets away with everything by skillfully playing on heartstrings. In rhetorical lingo, Dorothy’s tantrum wasn’t “pathetic” enough, because she was thinking too much about her own feelings and therefore failing to manipulate mine. Pathos happens to be the root word for “sympathy.” When a kid learns to read your emotions and play them like an instrument, you’re raising a good persuader.

Dorothy: “Dad, you look tired. Want to sit down?”

Me: “Thanks. Where did you have in mind?”

Dorothy: “Ben & Jerry’s.”

Logos, ethos, and pathos appeal to the brain, gut, and heart of adult and kid alike. While our brain tries to sort the facts, our gut tells us whether we can trust the other person, and our heart makes us want to do something about it. They’re the essence of effective persuasion. Admittedly, a toddler might find it difficult to apply logos, ethos, and pathos and read a playmate’s feelings strategically, but as with every other useful skill, you have to start young. Instead of “Use your words,” I would say, “See if you can talk him into it.” When my children made an honest attempt to persuade me to let them watch television, for instance, I gave in whenever possible: The win felt doubly rewarding to them. They got to watch their show, and they enjoyed having earned it. My kids grew so fond of debate, in fact, that they disputed the TV itself.

“Why should I eat candy that talks?”

“A doll that goes to the bathroom? I have a brother who does that.” It was as if I’d given them advertising immunization shots.

I tried to use all three forms of argument on George when, at the age of 7, he insisted on wearing shorts to school in the middle of winter. First I laid some ethos on him with my stern fatherly character: “You have to wear pants because I am your father and I told you to.” But he just looked at me with tears in his eyes.

Next I tried logos: “Pants will keep your legs from chapping,” I said reasonably. “You’ll feel a lot better.”

“But I want to wear shorts.”

So I resorted to pathos. I pulled up my pant legs and pranced around. “Doh-de-doh, look at me, here I go off to work wearing shorts.

Don’t I look stupid?”

“Yes,” he said, continuing to pull his shorts on.

“So why do you insist on wearing shorts yourself?”

“Because I don’t look stupid. And they’re my legs. I don’t mind if they get chapped.”

Oh, my. He had done me one better with ethos (I don’t look stupid), logos (They’re my legs — you don’t have standing in this case), and pathos (Stop worrying — I’ll deal with the pain issue). He was also making his first genuine attempt to argue instead of cry. I couldn’t possibly let him lose this one.

“All right,” I said. “You can wear shorts in school if your mother and I can clear it with your teacher and the principal. But you have to wear snow pants outside. Deal?”

“Deal.” He happily fetched his snow pants, and I called the school. A few weeks later the principal declared George’s birthday Shorts Day, and she even showed up in culottes. It was mid-February. We all had reached a comfortable — rhetorically comfortable, at least — kind of consensus, a belief in our decision by the group or community.