CHAPTER 1

Taking Charge of Your Children Without a Battle

Katie was an adorable seven-year-old with curly red hair. She and her mother had just returned from spending Sunday at the zoo and then going out to supper at Katie's favorite restaurant. Even though it was late when they got home, Glenda agreed to let Katie play one of her computer games for half an hour before going to bed. It had been an exciting day, and Glenda thought Katie might need time to unwind before falling asleep.

Half an hour later, Glenda bent over to give Katie a kiss and said, "Okay, sweetheart, it's bedtime."

"Mom, *please!* Can't I play Pokemon just a little longer? I'm not tired, and I don't want to go to bed."

"Honey, I'm sorry, but it's past your bedtime. We've had a long day and tomorrow is a school day," Glenda said patiently. "You know how tired you are in the morning, honey, and if I let you stay up past your bedtime you won't be able to get up and get ready for school." Glenda wasn't one of those parents who told their children to do things "because I said so." She wanted Katie to understand the reasons why things had to be done a certain way.

"I'll get up, I promise!" Katie pleaded.

"Now, Katie, didn't we have a nice time at the zoo today? And didn't you get to have a special Pu Pu Platter at the Chinese restaurant? Now I want you to be a good girl and get ready for bed."

"Oh, *please,* just a few more minutes. I'm almost done," Katie whined.

"Turn off that computer and get ready for bed!" Glenda snapped. Enough was enough.

"You never let me do anything!" Katie wailed. "It's not fair!"

Now Glenda was mad. "If you're not in bed in five minutes, young lady, you're going to be mighty sorry!"

At this unaccustomed harshness from her mother, Katie burst into tears and ran upstairs to her room.

Glenda resisted the urge to go up after her daughter. She was in no mood to try to smooth things over. Why, after all that she did for her, did Katie have to be so uncooperative? Why did she have to ruin what had been such a nice day?

As she sat there thinking, or rather brooding, Glenda was distracted by the faint sound of sobbing from Katie's bedroom. Guilt stabbed her. Maybe she could have found a better way to handle this. Wasn't there some way for a mother who loved her child as much as she loved Katie to avoid sending a seven-year-old to bed in tears?

Fifteen minutes later when Glenda went in to check on her, Katie lay still, pretending to be asleep. "Goodnight," whispered Glenda. No response. She bent down to give Katie a kiss on the forehead and felt her stiffen.

When she heard her mother's footsteps going back down the stairs, Katie fought the urge to call out "Mommy, come back." Her feelings were a jumble of anger and grief. Why couldn't her mother have let her have just five more minutes to finish playing Pokemon? On the other hand, she hated it when she did something that made her mother mad. Would your mother stop loving you if you were bad enough?

Martin, who was fifteen, had always been a responsible child, and so his parents had given him a great deal of freedom. He'd been allowed to take the bus downtown by himself from the time he was ten, and by thirteen he was earning money after school by baby-sitting and mowing lawns. So it came as a shock when he told his father that he and his friends were off to see a Pamela Anderson movie and his father said, "Isn't that an R-rated movie? I'm sorry, but you're going to have to find some other movie to go to."

Martin couldn't believe what he was hearing. It seemed absurd for his father to forbid him to see such a perfectly harmless movie. It wasn't as if he was planning to see a porno film.

"Oh, come on, Dad, all my friends are going."

"I don't care what your friends do," Martin's father said. "If their parents allow them to see R-rated movies without supervision, that's their business."

Martin doubted that his friends ever told their parents what movies they were actually going to see. But he didn't say that. Instead, he tried to convince his father. "What's the difference between seeing a movie with you and seeing it with my friends? It's still the same movie, isn't it?"

"That's not the point. I don't want you sneaking into movies and lying about your age."

"Who makes up those stupid ratings, anyway? Why should I be able to see movies full of violence but not ones with a little sex? There's worse stuff than that on TV all the time."

"I don't know, and I don't care." Martin's father was tired of his son's tendency to argue about everything. "You're not going, and that's final!"

"Oh, all right," Martin grumbled and went upstairs to his room.

As far as Martin's father was concerned that was the end of it. He never doubted that his son, who'd never given him any cause to worry, would respect his decision on this matter.

Up in his room, Martin couldn't believe that his father could be so unreasonable. Having been allowed so much latitude when he was younger, he wasn't about to let his father now, at his age, dictate how he spent his time with his friends.

What Katie and Martin demonstrate, each in their own way, is what happens when children argue with their parents. Sooner or later most parents are going to end up having the last word. But that doesn't mean that anybody ends up feeling very good about it afterwards.

According to her mother, Katie was "very strong-willed." That's one of the things parents say about argumentative children. Or at least that's what they say when they're in a good mood. When they're a little less guarded, parents say things like:

"She always wants everything her own way."

"He *always* thinks he's right."

"She knows everything!"

In fact, complaints about children's arguing rank right up there as one of the chief aggravations of parenthood. If only they'd do what we ask, at least once in a while, life would be a lot easier.

"Why do *I* always have to . . . ?"

"You never let me do *anything!*"

"Please, please, please!"

"It's not my turn!"

Do these protests sound familiar? If so, then you know how frustrating it can be to have to deal with a child's arguing.

How Bad Is Bad?

Do you ever wonder if your child is more argumentative than most? Maybe all children are argumentative. Maybe your child is more reasonable than most. Maybe not.

When I was doing research for this book, I advertised in the local newspaper for parents who were willing to be interviewed about problems with "highly argumentative children." You'd be surprised who showed up.

One father I spoke to considered his teenage son argumentative because the boy sometimes wanted to know why he wasn't allowed to do certain things. Several parents thought of their children as argumentative, not because the children argued with them, but because they didn't always do what they were told. On the other hand, I've spoken to several nice parents in my office over the years who seemed to take their children's lack of respect for granted, even though their children were outrageously rude and disrespectful.

To get some idea of how argumentative your child is, take the following highly unscientific quiz.

How Argumentative Is Your Child?

Do the following descriptions apply to your child:

1—Rarely? 2—Sometimes? 3—Often?

_____ 1. When you have a disagreement, your child is willing to let you have the last word.

_____ 2. When your child challenges you, he or she may argue with your ideas but is usually careful to avoid attacking you personally.

_____ 3. When you're giving your side of an argument, you get the sense that your child is just waiting to respond rather than making an effort to understand what you are saying.

_____ 4. When your child realizes that you mean business, he or she will usually stop arguing.

_____ 5. When you make a point about someone or something, your child tends to make the opposite point.

_____ 6. When nothing else seems to work, your child gets very emotional to make an impact on you.

_____ 7. When there is an argument, your child has a tendency to go on and on, trying to prolong the argument until he or she gets his or her way.

_____ 8. If you give your child a choice of options, he or she will ask for something that wasn't one of the options.

_____ 9. When you tell your child to do something, he or she gets up and does it.

_____ 10. You find yourself battling with your child.

_____ 11. When you and your child argue, he or she actively considers the point you're trying to make.

_____ 12. Your child goes on and on if he or she wants something; won't give up; tries to wear you down.

_____ 13. Your child usually has to have his or her own way.

_____ 14. Your child won't take no for an answer.

_____ 15. Your child will bring up again arguments that you thought were settled and done with.

(*cont.*)

Scoring: Add the numbers you assigned to items 3, 5–8, 10, and 12–15. Then reverse the scores (change 1 to 3, 3 to 1, 2 stays the same) you assigned to items 1–2, 4, 9, and 11 and add this score to the first score.

What your answers mean:

- A score of 31 or over suggests that your child is very argumentative.
- A score between 21 and 30 suggests that your child argues about as much as the average child.
- A score of 20 or less suggests that your child is not very argumentative.

As I said, this quiz is not very scientific. It's really just a device to get you thinking about your child and your relationship. If your child scored low on this quiz, congratulations; it should be relatively easy to apply the suggestions I'll be making in the following pages. If your child scored higher in the argumentative range, you may have your work cut out for you. On the other hand, you may benefit all the more from the suggestions you'll read in the next two chapters.

"Do I *Have* To?"

Like a lot of familiar experiences, "arguing" turns out to be not so easy to define. Perhaps that's because the verb "to argue" has two very different connotations. There is one sense in which arguing isn't such a bad thing. "To present reasons for a point of view" and "to persuade by reason" are examples of the kind of exercise in logic that most parents would like to encourage in their children. There's nothing wrong with a six-year-old who presents reasons for wanting to do one thing as opposed to another or with a fourteen-year-old who tries to persuade her parents to allow her to do something with her friends. Such "arguing" can be part of a reasonable discussion in which parent and child learn to negotiate the gap between their two different perspectives.

But you didn't pick up this book to learn how to cut down on the number of reasonable discussions in your family. The second and more familiar sense of "arguing" refers to those annoying examples of children insisting on having things their way without respect for their parents' point of view. When children argue in this second way, it doesn't

feel like a discussion. It feels like being attacked. It's unpleasant; it's frustrating. Arguing in this sense isn't an exercise in reasoning; it's emotional bullying.

The "Do I *have* to?"s and "I don't wanna!"s that turn everyday routines into a battleground are familiar to every parent. Sometimes it seems that children are happy only when they get their own way. When they don't, their protests trigger a barrage of arguments that never seem to get settled, just broken off to be resumed later.

The essential difference between arguing as part of a reasonable discussion and arguing as a child's insisting on getting his or her own way is that *argument-as-discussion* doesn't challenge the parent's decision-making authority, whereas *argument-as-resistance* does. Maybe we should call the reasoned give-and-take in which children express their opinions but don't challenge their parents' authority a "discussion" and reserve the term "argument" for children trying to get their own way without regard for their parents' point of view or for their right to have the final say. It's this second sense of arguing, when children defy their parents and insist on getting their own way, that creates so much friction in families.

Arguments, like the one Glenda had with Katie over bedtime, are upsetting to parents and children alike. By their very nature, arguments upset the bond of mutuality between parent and child, leaving them feeling like adversaries. Suddenly Us becomes You-against-me. *Why,* Glenda wondered, *couldn't Katie be a little more cooperative? Why,* Katie wondered, *did her mother have to be so mean?*

Although a certain amount of arguing between parents and children is inevitable, when arguing becomes a regular feature of parent–child interactions, animosity displaces harmony in the household. Recurrent arguments undermine a parent's appreciation of her child as well as the child's feeling of being taken seriously and respected by the parent. If seven-year-old Katie starts arguing whenever her mother tells her to do something, Glenda may find herself longing for the time when her daughter was little, when she looked up at her mother's face with wide eyes and nodded agreement with everything she said. It's a sad thing when parents start missing the children that were, instead of enjoying the children who are.

Fifteen-year-old Martin's argument with his father wasn't just about going to an R-rated movie. That was part of it, of course, but like all arguments with real feeling behind them there was more at stake

than the subject at hand. Martin had a point about how the ratings system censors sex more than violence. But his father, not wanting to give in, refused to acknowledge this point—or the child making it. What also didn't get acknowledged, because it didn't get discussed, was the boy's feelings about being too old to be told what movies he could or couldn't see.

At what point does a fifteen-year-old decide that if he can't ever win an argument with his father, can't even get a fair hearing, he might as well start disobeying him on the sly?

No one needs to tell parents how frustrating arguing with their children can be. Nothing gets done without a battle. From getting up in the morning to getting ready for bed at night, everything gets bogged down in a litany of "Please, just a little bit longer"s, "Why can't I?"s, and "It's not fair!"s. Everything is subject to debate. Everything is a struggle. Some children, it seems, are never without an argument, even if rarely a good one. They resist and complain, they demand and protest—anything to get their own way—leaving their parents feeling alternately helpless and furious.

By being forced into arguments with their children, parents are brought down to the child's level. People in charge don't have to argue. They're the boss. Bosses don't argue; they command. If the arguing is chronic, the whole balance of parental authority is eroded. Parent and child become adversaries. It's not the way things are supposed to be.

The emotionality of arguments escalates through a series of actions and reactions. Here's eleven-year-old Lorelei's mother:

> "I try to be flexible, but if I remind her to do one of her chores, she'll say, 'But I'm doing *this* now. I don't want to do *that*.' So I give her time, but when I remind her later, she'll still not want to do what I ask. She objects to everything I tell her to do."

When her mother gives her choices—"You can work on your homework at the table or in your room"—Lorelei wants to do it some entirely different way. "But I want to do it on the couch!" Round and

round they go. Lorelei's mother says, "I get sucked in. She gets very irritable, and I get caught up in that emotionality. Sometimes it turns into a shouting match. I lose control because she loses control." Sound familiar?

That's where arguments lead—emotionality, loss of control, shouting matches. By arguing, often at the most inconvenient times, children turn what otherwise should be good times into anything but. The whining, the protests, the complaining—from the very children you spend half your life doing things for—are as much fun to listen to as the blare of raucous music when you have a headache. But it isn't just the noise. It's the wheedling, the demandingness, the me, me, me mentality that triggers resentment in parents. Everything becomes a battle of wills. It's exhausting.

It can start with a simple request.

"Please turn off the TV."

"Time to get ready for bed."

"It's time to get dressed."

The child resists.

"Oh, please, can't I just finish this show?"

"I don't wanna go to bed. I'm not tired."

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing!"

It's this resistance that pits parent and child in opposition to each other. The child's persistence provokes a corresponding insistence on the part of the parent. The more recalcitrant the child, the more frustrated the parent. In the grip of escalating emotion, something unfortunate happens. Parents lose their cool.

Even the calmest parents become reactive in the face of too many arguments. Unfortunately, emotional reactivity leads to a battle of wills in which the only way for the parent to win is for the child to lose. There is another way, a way that allows both parents and children to emerge as winners—responsive listening.

Responsive Listening Lets the Air Out of Arguments

Responsive listening is a proactive technique that enables parents to respond to their children's arguments without getting caught up in a struggle. By listening, instead of reacting to their children's feelings, parents are able to remain in control of their own emotions—and of their interactions with argumentative children. Responsive listening isn't magic and, as we'll see, applying it sometimes takes patience and imagination, but it goes a long way toward putting parents in charge of arguments they once felt exasperated with.

It takes two to argue. The child's contribution is insisting on having things his way. The parent's contribution is countering this insistence. If one person insists and the other counters, the argument will continue until someone is willing to let go of trying to have the last word. During the time that a parent chooses to listen to what a pleading child has to say, there is no argument. Eventually the parent may have to respond to the child's plea with a yes, no, or maybe. But as long as that parental ruling can be deferred, there is no need for argument.

When a child says:	*An argumentative response might be:*
"Jesse came into my room and messed everything up!"	"Why can't you and your brother manage to get along for one day?"
"Somebody stole my hairbrush!"	"Nobody took your hairbrush. Maybe you just misplaced it."
"I hate you!"	"Well, that's too bad, honey, because you just can't. . . .
"I'm not going to wear braces!"	"I know how you feel, sweetheart, but the braces will help make your teeth nice and straight."

Here's how a responsive listener might respond:

"Jesse came into my room and messed everything up!"	"Boy, you sound angry!"
"Somebody stole my hairbrush!"	"Oh?"
"I hate you!"	"I really made you mad, didn't I?"
"I'm not going to wear braces!"	"Why not, sweetheart?"

Responsive listening works by separating the process of *expressing feelings* from a decision about *acting on those feelings*.

When children argue with their parents, they are expressing their wishes—and asking for them to be granted. They aren't tired—and they want to stay up a little longer to play on the computer. They wish they could see a certain R-rated movie—and they want their parents to let them. Almost every argument has both of these components: an expression of feeling and a request. Unfortunately, parents get drawn into arguing with their children's feelings in order to justify not going along with their requests.

When seven-year-old Katie insisted that she wasn't tired and didn't want to go to bed, her mother responded the way most parents would: with an explanation of *why* Katie needed to go to bed (as though explanations were relevant to why children don't want to do what they're told). Here's how this argument might have gone differently if Glenda had used responsive listening.

"Okay, sweetheart, it's bedtime."

"Mom, *please!* Can't I play Pokemon just a little longer? I'm not tired, and I don't want to go to bed."

At this point, instead of explaining why Katie needed to go to bed, Glenda might have drawn her out about what she was feeling. "How's it going with your game, sweetheart?"

Probably Katie would have responded to that invitation by talking about what she was doing, and probably she'd still be anxious to convince her mother to let her stay up until she finished. If Glenda were to

stick with responsive listening a little longer, she'd again resist the urge to explain and instead say something like, "You don't want to stop playing until you're finished, do you? Sometimes you wish you could stay up as long as you want, don't you?" The essential point would be to invite Katie to express her feelings and then to acknowledge those feelings.

In this case, assuming that Glenda didn't want to change her mind about bedtime, she couldn't really put off the decision very long. So, at some point, she'd pick up Katie or take her hand and walk her to her room, saying something like, "I'm sorry, honey, I know you wanted to finish, but it's bedtime."

Although Katie might feel a little better at this point for having her wish to stay up longer acknowledged, she'd probably still complain about having to go to bed. But instead of getting upset about this protest and arguing back, Glenda could see Katie's complaining as an expression of her feelings that again gives her mother the chance to listen and be sympathetic. "I know, honey, it's not fair."

In this example the argument is short-lived, but the child ends up feeling less bad. Yes, she has to go to bed, but at least her mother seems to understand how she feels about it.

When young children protest their parents' rules, their "reasons" aren't always relevant. Why does a child want to stay up late? Because she does.[1] Parents who insist on explaining why a child should clean up her room or go to bed when they say so create the impression that their decisions must be justified—and are therefore open to debate. The more their parents accept their feelings, the less children question the parents' decisions. When it comes to responding to their children's protests, parents should talk less and listen more.

How does a parent learn what to say in order to disarm a child's resistance to doing what he's told? The answer is that you don't disarm a child's resistance—you learn to accept it as a perfectly legitimate expression of the child's feelings and wishes.

Things are a little different with teenagers. Fifteen-year-old Martin's argument with his father about going to an R-rated movie had ele-

[1]If this answer seems hard to accept, consider the following questions: What's your favorite flavor of ice cream? Why?

ments of three great themes of adolescence: the freedom to do what you want, the hypocrisy of authority figures, and the right to respect for your ideas. Martin's father could have used the principles of responsive listening by doing one or both of two things: acknowledging his son's points by saying something like "You may be right about that," or by finding a moment in the discussion to invite the boy to elaborate on his perspective, in this case perhaps about the double standard in movie ratings.

For example:

"Oh, come on, Dad, all my friends are going."

"Do you think our rules are too strict?"

Or:

"Why should I be able to see movies full of violence but not ones with a little sex? There's worse stuff than that all the time on TV."

"You may have a point there. Are you just trying to convince me to let you go to that movie, or do your really think there's hypocrisy in the rating system?"

As with Katie's bedtime, if Martin's father wants to forbid him to go to that movie, he's not going to be able to postpone this decision until later. Nevertheless, there's always time for a father to recognize his son's feelings about not being able to do something with his friends as well as his ideas about how movie censors are more intolerant of sex than violence.

In both of these examples, it's not hard to see how a child's feelings can go unacknowledged by a parent who is only trying to enforce a little discipline. It's also easy to see how the parents in both cases could have made their children feel better by listening to what they had to say.

Responsive listening won't make a seven-year-old want to go to bed on time or a teenager feel good about missing a movie with his friends. But having their feelings heard and acknowledged will make them feel a little less unfairly treated.

Sounds easy enough, doesn't it? If so, that because I've abstracted two examples in which it's easy to sympathize with the child's point of

view—especially if you're sitting back reading about it, instead of being the parent-on-the-spot, backed into a corner by an insistent child.

Even nice children argue a lot. It's natural for them to push for what they want—and it's natural for parents to feel like pushing back. The idea behind responsive listening is that arguments won't escalate if parents don't argue back.

Some parents complain that their children argue constantly. These children don't just make an occasional appeal for understanding. Rather, they seem to resist everything their parents tell them to do. One reason resistance becomes a habit is that most children rarely feel listened to. Oh, they get to do what they want a certain amount of the time; but you'd be surprised how many children feel that their parents aren't very good listeners. The adversarial nature of interactions with "argumentative children" is fueled by the child's feeling that he or she has to fight to get a hearing.

Responsive listening cuts down on the chronic arguments that some children seem so adept at dragging their parents into, because it breaks the cycle of the parent saying one thing and the child saying another. As long as both sides keep trying to get their own point of view across—and neither is willing to listen to the other one—the cycle of arguing can only escalate until it ends in anger and resentment. When you practice responsive listening you avoid arguing about your decision by not discussing it. Instead you listen receptively to what your child wants, feels, thinks, and wishes. As long as you're listening, there is no argument.

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