

Fight-free families Janet Hall (1994)

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Dr Janet Hall says that, although no family can be totally fight-free, "the pain of fighting can be reduced...if family members learn to co-operate in their conflict resolution"(p. 7). Her programme is based on principles of learning theory and win/win conflict resolution to help parents and other family members become "(almost) fight-free."

The book is aimed at parents of toddlers through to teenagers. Parents are told that a fight-free family comes "through teaching themselves and their children how to relate to each other" (p. 1). What is needed is an understanding of common reasons for day-to-day fights, how children learn (through modelling, cues, and consequences), and two keys to win/win fight resolution (communication and compassion). Dr Hall outlines these principles and specific strategies for modelling desirable behaviour, helping children to respond to rules, and using rewards and punishments effectively. She places particular emphasis on the family meeting as a strategy for teaching family members how to negotiate in resolving conflict.

These ideas and strategies, based on sound behavioural principles, are effectively summarised in a friendly "chatty" writing style. However, there is insufficient explanation and a lack of specific instruction on how to apply some of the strategies. Most parents would benefit from practice exercises to help grasp them.

Reducing "normal" day-to-day fights in families appears to be the focus of the book. However, this purpose needs to be made clearer in the introduction. Parents experiencing more serious

difficulties are also likely to pick up the book. For them, there is insufficient attention to the feelings and cognitions behind fights. I have particular concern for families where aggression and abuse are the norm as a way of dealing with conflict. In such families, it is not sufficient to aim simply for behavioural change; affect and cognitions need to be dealt with concurrently. In the opening pages of the book, Dr Hall does briefly caution parents to "seek counselling if fights result in lasting pain, lack of growth or go on too long without resolution" (p. 5). At the end of the book, she provides a list of reasons for seeking professional help. However, I feel that such warnings need greater emphasis in the early pages of the book.

Dr Hall has a number of important messages for parents regarding such things as children's needs, their different responses to reward and punishment, and developmental differences in their ability to cooperate and negotiate. There is one message, however, with which I have some difficulty. Dr Hall appears to take a "storm and stress" view of adolescence, with statements such as "teenagers rarely value anything that the parents value and are constantly wanting to challenge the rules and create their own" (p. 64). Although this view is tempered with some sensitive advice on how to communicate effectively with teenagers, I would prefer that parents were given a more optimistic view of adolescence. In my experience, teenagers are not necessarily egocentric, constantly challenging, anti-parent beings. Most care about, and value, their families and are capable of cooperating with

parents to achieve shared goals. It is often parental attitudes and expectations, such as those being reinforced by Dr Hall, which make dealing with teenagers more difficult. Parents do not need to see their teenagers as adversaries who present a continual challenge. A less pessimistic attitude would assist parents to work more cooperatively with their teenagers.

Overall, given current attitudes about violence, the prevalence of family violence, and numerous difficulties confronting today's families, this book provides refreshing reassurance to parents that there are ways to reduce, or even avoid, fighting and achieve greater harmony within the family.

I feel that parents who are experiencing "normal" difficulties have the most to gain from the book, as it is. Such parents appear to be the target audience. They are families where relationships are strong and where serious fighting has not become entrenched. They will find some useful strategies to deal with day-to-day family conflicts. They are more likely to

be receptive to change and able to apply the strategies as a way to enhance relationships, improve communication, and reduce the incidence of fights. Yet some may have difficulty in grasping certain strategies because of limited explanation and elaboration.

Parents who are experiencing serious conflict and/or using aggressive means of dealing with conflict might be doomed to failure if they believe that this book provides the answers to their problems. In such cases, I suggest that the book has limited use, unless it is used under professional guidance and in conjunction with other techniques. I do, however, recommend the book to professionals working with families, particularly those with younger children, as an adjunct in parenting programmes and in counselling.

*Kathy Skuja
Department of Psychology
University of Southern Queensland*