

Unit 5 Case Study: Conflict Styles and Tactics

Deborah Davis, Ph.D.

“He Said, She Said...”

Marie, an adult college student and mother of a fifteen-year old son, has been experiencing an ongoing conflict in her home for some time now. She and her fiancé, Mike, have been at odds for the last several months of their relationship. At the center of the conflict is Lenny, Marie’s son by her first marriage. Marie and Mike argue over the way Marie punishes Lenny when he doesn’t do his household chores or violates his curfew. Mike feels Marie is too easy or soft when it comes to disciplining Lenny. When an issue arises that requires her to discipline her son, her fiancé is very vocal about his disapproval of her punishment choice. Conflict always comes of these interactions.

Last Saturday night, for example, Lenny came home way past his agreed upon curfew. Marie was nervously waiting in the living room for Lenny to return, thinking something terrible had happened to him. When Marie heard Lenny’s key in the lock at 2:45 am, she jumped up, ran to the door, and greeted Lenny with, “Where have you been? I have been so worried about you! I thought you were lying on the street somewhere! Why didn’t you call me?”

Lenny, unable to get a word into Marie’s assault of questions, stood in front of the open door, waiting for Marie to stop pummeling him with questions and accusations. Meanwhile, Mike strolled down the stairs, half asleep, wondering what all the noise was about. When he reached the bottom stair, he recognized a familiar sound: Marie and Lenny are at it again, he thought to himself.

Mike stood quietly for a moment, listening to the accusations, questions, denials, excuses between mother and son, hoping he could find a moment to interject. Lenny, casually leaning against the wall, stared straight ahead while Marie continued her assault. Mike stood silently as Marie told Lenny that such behavior would not be tolerated; there would be punishment for his irresponsible actions. “In fact, Lenny,” Marie said, “as a result of your being inconsiderate and not notifying us about your being late, you will need to be home by 10:00 pm for the next four Saturday nights.”

“WHAT?” screamed Lenny, “that is so unfair!”

Mike then intervened, saying, “ Marie, that’s not real punishment. If I had stayed out past curfew, my father would have beaten the living....”

Marie, trying to control her anger, turned to Mike and said, “This is not about you; this is about my son.”

After a long pause, Mike said, "Fine. YOU deal with it. I am going to bed. In fact, why don't we all go to bed? We can deal with this tomorrow," whereupon Lenny vaulted up the stairs and slammed his bedroom door, leaving Marie standing, speechless. Each stood silently, Marie looking up the stairs after Lenny and Mike, staring at Marie. Mike heaved a loud sigh and turned to go up the stairs, back to bed.

Very quietly, Marie said, "Why did you do that?" "What?" asked Mike innocently.

"Tell Lenny we would deal with this problem tomorrow," Marie spurted out. "You know I need to deal with this problem now!" Marie was feeling the resentment grow.

"I just thought," Mike said, "it's late and telling him that he has to be home by 10 o'clock for the next month is not a severe punishment for what he did, is it, Marie? Tomorrow, we can decide what real punishment he should get, alright? Let's go to bed." Again, Mike turned to go up the stairs, back to bed.

Marie, beside herself, followed Mike, and grabbing his arm, blurted out, "Real punishment? How would you know? You never had children. What do you know about being a parent? You never even call your own mother."

"You are too soft on that boy—that's all I know. How will he ever learn the difference between right and wrong?" Mike responded.

"All I know," said Marie, "is that he is my son and I know what is best for him."

"Fine," said Mike, "I'm going to bed." He turned and stomped up the stairs. Marie stood alone at the foot of the stairs, seething.

The next morning, Marie sat at the kitchen table, quietly sipping her coffee. As Mike came in, he moved to Marie and slowly leaned down to kiss her. Her body rigid, she pulled away. "You're still mad at me, Marie?" Mike asked.

Marie said nothing, her lips pursed in a frozen sneer.

"Come on, honey," he said. Still no response. Mike stared at Marie for what seemed like an eternity. Obviously, she was not going to even look at Mike, much less say anything.

Just at that moment, Lenny burst in. Sensing Marie's repressed anger and Mike's futile attempts at conversation, he said, "Hey guys, sorry about last night. Next time, I'll call, I promise. I really don't have to be home at 10 for the next four Saturday nights, do I? I'll do whatever you want around the house," he whispered to Marie. "I'll rake the leaves; I'll take out the trash; I'll even mow the lawn—just let me come home late, okay, Mom?"

All eyes were on Marie. She looked up at Lenny and her heart melted. My son, she thought. He's a good boy and he didn't really do anything wrong. He is not a thief, she silently assured herself. "Oh, okay, honey," she lovingly said to Lenny, "we can forget about it this time. Please, though, call the next time you know you are going to be late."

"Sure, Mom, sure," Lenny said, and off he went.

Mike stared at Marie, frozen to the spot. "Well, that will teach him how to be responsible," Mike said.

"Look," Marie jumped in, "I know how to handle my own son, so please don't interfere." She began washing the coffee cups, the clattering almost deafening.

"Interfere?" Mike screamed. "I thought we were a family and I had some say in the matter."

"You do, Mike, you do. It's just that..."

"Forget it," Mike interrupted. "I don't know what you want anymore. I need to go to work," and he stormed out the back door.

Marie stood at the sink, letting the hot water run between her fingers, remembering that today was her birthday.