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Counseling Solutions at SMI

Arguing Badly, Part 1

A student in my class on *Creating an Effective Argument* said that she had enrolled for the purpose of learning how to win arguments with her 14 year old daughter.

A number of thoughts rushed through my mind. Why argue with a person whose brain is not yet developed? My other thoughts got worse. You don't really want to hear them.

Adults and children alike use many tactics to "win" arguments by avoiding the question, or argument, entirely. Here are several logical fallacies not to use.

Tactic # 1: Use a "Red Herring"

A red herring is a dead fish. Dog trainers used to use red herrings to train their tracking dogs and try to get them off the trail.

A red herring is the introduction of an irrelevant point into an argument.

Politicians are experts with dead fish. And so are children.

In the case of the 14 year old daughter, let's call her Sally, who asks why she can't go out with her girl friends to a movie and the parent answers, "because I am your mother and I told you so."

That does not answer the question but rather brings up another topic all together, such as parental authority.

The daughter then might say, "Well all my friends' parents are letting them go." And so the daughter has introduced another red herring and that begins yet another topic to the discussion and brings them further way from the original question.

Tactic #2 "Ad Hominem," meaning, against the man.

This tactic is a favorite of politicians and TV show hosts.

Ad Hominem argument attacks the character, or motives of the person who presents the argument rather than the argument itself.

Questioning if the speaker is telling the truth is ok.

Sally, the 14 year old, might continue her argument with, "You are the worst mother, I hate you!" The mother slams her with yet another ad hominem, "Go to your room until you come to your senses." Both daughter and mother have now totally forgotten about the original request.

Tactic #3 Appeal to Authority and Appeal to the People.

I put these together because they have a lot in common.

This tactic is a favorite of opinion programs disguised as news reports. Let us not forget the use of celebrities.

A faulty appeal to authority is an appeal to someone who has no special knowledge in the area being discussed.

What bugs me the most is interviewing news reporters themselves as though they really know something or worse yet asking the people on the street for their opinions.

When we claim that our viewpoint is correct because many other people agree with it, we are committing the appeal to the people fallacy.

The general public is rarely a proper authority on any subject.

Sally seemingly comes to her senses and somewhat returns to the original goal of gaining permission to go to the movie with her friends.

Sally reports that the school is encouraging the students to view the movie and all her classmates have gone. In fact her friends are the last to go and they all think it is a great movie. Now what mother can argue against the authority and superior knowledge of educators and the unquestionable wisdom of hundreds of children? So she repeats what she has heard from her own parents, "It everyone jumps off a cliff does that make it right?" Okay, here we go again both are avoiding the question.

Finally the 14 year old screams, "You never let me do anything."

And that dear reader is...

Tactic # 5 The Straw Man

The Straw Man is changing or exaggerating an opponent's position or argument to make it easier to refute.

Actually Mom is generally aware of her daughter's needs and often responds in a helpful manner. Our 14 year old has manipulated the situation. Mom has fallen into the trap and reinforced the situation herself. What is a poor defenseless mother to do?

So she yells back with her own Straw Man, "You wait until I tell your father. He will fix you."

Part 2: Will Dad hold up to the undeveloped brain of a 14 year old?

For more information go to: **www.MarriageCounseling.org**.

I referenced *The Fallacy Detective* by Nathaniel Bluedorn and Hans Bluedorn for this article

Arguing Badly, Part 2

In part 1 we visited Sally, a precocious 14 year old, who tried to seek permission from her mother to go to the movies. Both she and her mother argued ineffectively by using logical fallacies. The argument took a respite when Mom sent Sally to her room to be “fixed” by Dad upon his return home. We were left with the question, “will Dad hold up to the underdeveloped brain of a 14 year old?”

Our story picks up as Dad enters into the kitchen and sees Mom’s tears of exasperation. **(Pity)**

He exclaims, “What now? What has she done this time?” **(Assumption)**

“Sally, you get in here. Honestly you are becoming just like your older sister who fought with Mom all the time and now is living with what’s his name?” **(Analogy)**

“Did you make your mother cry?” **(Post hoc)**

“I didn’t make her cry. She wouldn’t listen to me. All I wanted to do is to go to the movies with my friends. Mom wouldn’t let me,” yells Sally. **(Pity)**

“All of my friends are going, the school wants us to go and everyone says the movie is great.” **(Bandwagon)**

“The theater is nearby, no one has ever been hurt there.” **(Tradition)**

“The movie is 3D. You get glasses and everything.” **(Hi Tech)**

Sally, sighs, and then takes a breath. Finally she yells out, “I have to go!!!” **(Repetition)**

A moment passes and she softly says, “Come on Dad you are the best, please let me go.” **(Snob appeal)**

“I have got to go, the movie ends tonight.” **(Exigency)**

Then Dad does what all dads do. He turns to his wife and says, “Well dear, what do you think?”

Logical fallacies, definitions and comments:

Pity: *Appeal to pity* is to make someone do something only because we pity them or we pity something associated with them. Both Mom and Sally use this effectively.

Assumption: *An assumption* is something taken for granted, or accepted as true without proof. Dad immediately assumes that Sally is at fault but has no proof.

Analogy: *Reasoning with analogy* is when we compare two or more items with each other. These items are the same in one or more respects, and we conclude that they will be the same in other ways also. Sally may argue as her older sister did but there are no grounds to conclude that she will become like her sister.

Post hoc: *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* is concluding that since A happened before B, then A must have caused B. Sally did not directly make her mother cry. Her mother's judgment upon the situation caused the mother to cry. Change your judgment and you will change the emotion that follows.

Bandwagon: *The Bandwagon* pressures us to do something just because many other people are doing it. This is a favorite of every age group.

Tradition: *Appeal to tradition*, is used to encourage us to buy something or take some action because it is associated with things of the past. Simply because no one has been hurt at the theater in the past does not assure safety in the present.

Hi Tech: In an *appeal to hi-tech* we are encouraged to buy something because it is the "latest thing" not necessarily because it is the best thing. The movie may be the latest but what of its content?

Repetition: *Repetition* is repeating a message loudly and very often in the hope that it will be believed. Loud voices are not an argument.

Snob appeal: *Snob appeal* is used when someone tries to persuade us to think that their product would make us better, or stand out, from everyone else. Every dad wants to be the best dad.

Exigency: *Exigency* is used when a time limit is given as a reason for you to do what someone wants. It has to happen now or it is too late.

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