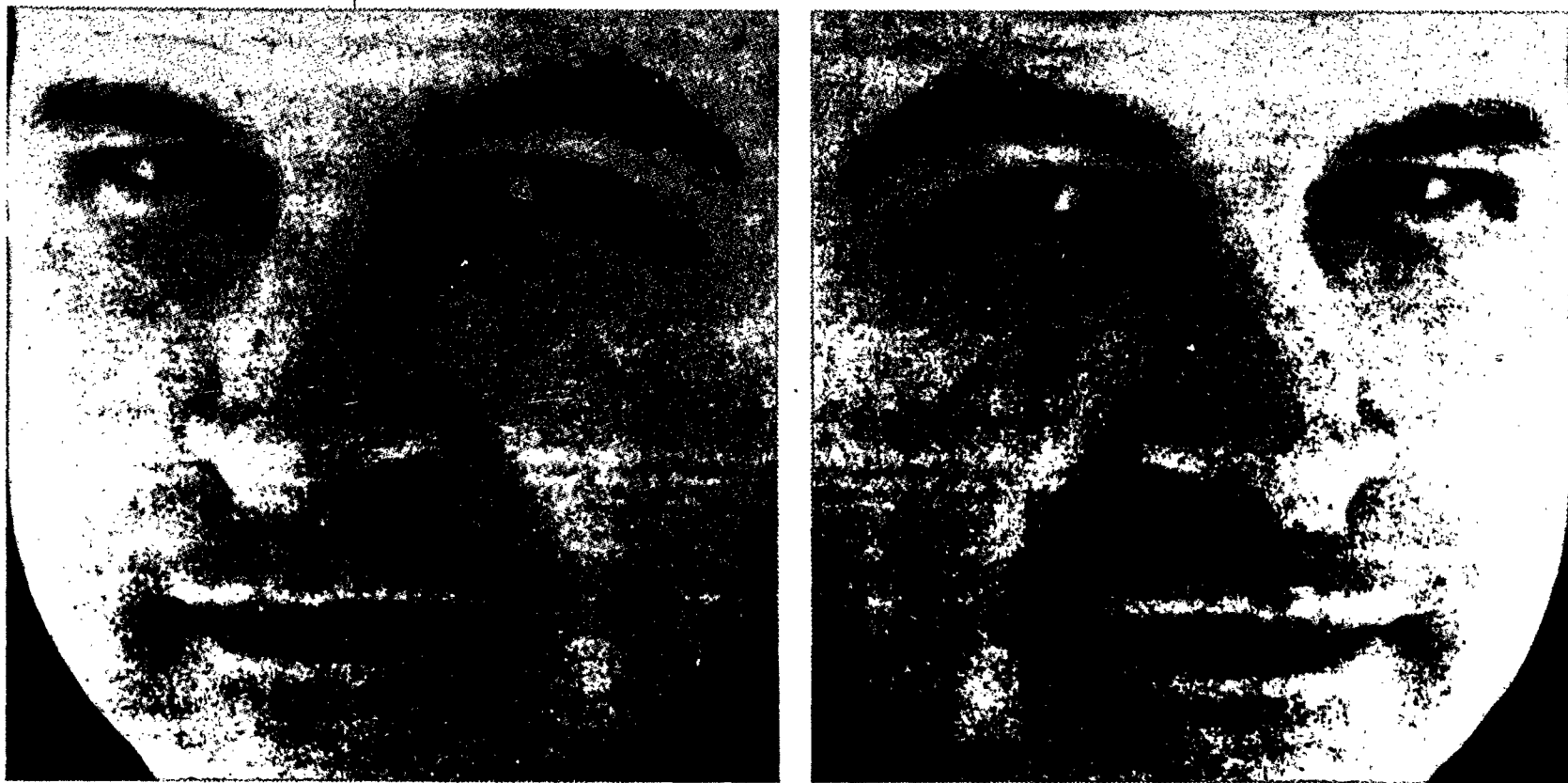


WHEN IS A SQUARE NOT A SQUARE?..



When It Has Two Sides

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Keep That Family Conflict within Bounds

By MARY KAY WILLIAMS

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There's a story about a wealthy Englishman who died in the 1880's. In his will, he left a sizeable amount of money to any couple from his town who could get through the first year of marriage without a quarrel. Last reports revealed that the money was still unclaimed.

This little episode illustrates that conflict in marriage is inevitable and should be expected. Conflict can actually be a positive factor in developing a healthy relationship because it points to areas which need reconciliation, compromise, or accommodation.

A couple may be jeopardizing their future if they avoid arguments during engagement. Some marriage counselors would even advise provoking a quarrel during this time just to see how the other party reacts. But picture the young bride whose husband is angry with her for the first time. Then the old comedy routine of "I'll pack my bags and go home to mother" doesn't seem too funny.

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While conflict in the early years of marriage destroys some romantic illusions, it can contribute to a relationship that is more realistic, stable and emotionally honest.

The second group that benefits from a healthy understanding of conflict are children. Children become upset over conflict in the home when it threatens them and their security. But when they see their parents work out disagreements and come together again afterwards, then conflict does not become synonymous with rejection.

By their example, the parents are subtly preparing their children to deal productively with tensions and conflicts among peer groups, and later with a marriage partner.

Conflict takes many forms which are highly destructive to marriage and family living. These forms fail to produce any solution, or to develop deeper communication in any way. They camouflage the particular

tension to an unrecognizable expression, and lead to more critical divisions in the marital relationships.

The following are some non-productive types:

1. **Silent treatment**—The act of not-saying-anything does, in fact, say a great deal. When there's no verbal communication, there is still communication on another level which is open to misinterpretation and error.

2. **Vicious circle**—This form refuses to admit any root causes of conflict. It assumes that the here and now causes the problem. "My wife is always nagging when I stay out at night, but I stay out because she's always nagging me."

3. **Double-binding communication**—The other party is put in a position in which he can't possibly win. A wife says to her husband: "You must be more authoritative. I demand that you be the head of the house."

4. **Scapegoating**—When the parents are unable to satisfactorily resolve their tensions in other ways, the child can become the scapegoat. The child who resembles the offending parent may be criticized for

all the characteristics one parent dislikes in the other; the child who has a poor record in school may become the scapegoat for parents disappointed in their own achievements; a child's striking physical abnormalities may become the symbol of some "sin" or abnormality of the parents.

Some other types would be a sickly-sweet submission: "Anything you say, Sweetheart"; or manipulating morality or social mores so they're on your side; withholding affection; or giving physical violence.

However, there are techniques which can aid in a more mature and productive handling of differences. Among them are these ground rules:

1. Bring out the problem before it accelerates. This curbs emotional involvement, and

pressure build-up. However, one needs a cautious judgment to determine what is petty and unworthy of discussion and what might have serious implications for future married life.

2. Check the accuracy of your interpretation of the other's actions or words.

3. Stick to the boundaries of the specific quarrel. Limit the argument to the issue or condition, not the total relationship. Avoid personal attacks. You're not fighting fair when you strike at the other's ego by making references to deeply sensitive and vulnerable spots, or past failures.

4. Come to some decision or new understanding. Focus attention on what each party can do to decrease the tension, rather than who won the argument, or who was wrong.

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