What to say after your six-year-old heard you argue

"My partner and I had a loud argument in the kitchen and our six-year-old was on the stairs, listening. What do I say to her now?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Oh, that? That was nothing. Go back to bed."

"That was nothing" asks your child to un-hear something she heard. She knows it was something; now she is alone with it.

What the research found

Researchers studying children and adult conflict describe "emotional security": children watch how the adults around them handle conflict, and use what they see to judge whether the family is safe. On that view, it is not only the argument that matters to a child, but how it ends.

In one experiment, 98 children and young people aged five to nineteen heard recordings of adults arguing that ended in different ways. The more fully an argument was resolved, the less negatively the children responded. That was a lab study of recorded strangers, not of a child's own parents, but it points at the ending as the part to get right.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"We argued loudly, and you heard it. That wasn't about you. We talked, and we've sorted it out."

ZERO TO THREE's guidance for parents of young children says the same in plain words: reassure your child, remind them they are not the cause of the argument, and if things are escalating, stop and continue when your child is not there.

What the words do

Take 2 names what happened, so her own ears are confirmed. "That wasn't about you" answers the question young children often carry quietly. "We've sorted it out" gives her the ending, and only say it if it is true; "we're still working on it" is an honest ending too. If you can, let her see the two of you being ordinary with each other afterwards.

An argument that involves hitting, threats, breaking things or anyone being afraid is not an ordinary disagreement, and the words on this page are not enough for it. If anyone is in danger, contact your local emergency services; the support page lists crisis lines.

If you live in two homes

If you are separated and your child heard an argument at a handover or on the phone, the same three things help: it wasn't about you, the adults are handling it, and you don't have to pick a side. Never ask your child to carry a message or report on the other home. Move hard conversations with the other parent to a time and place your child can't hear.

In the UK

In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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4. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
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6. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.