What to say after your ten-year-old heard you arguing

"Our ten-year-old heard us shouting about money last night. This morning he's very quiet. What do I say to him?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Don't worry about it. It's grown-up stuff."

"It's grown-up stuff" is meant to protect him. At ten, it can also tell him the subject is off limits, so the worry stays inside.

What the research found

In a study of 116 families with children aged eight to sixteen, mothers and fathers kept records of their everyday disagreements at home, including the ones their children saw, and how the children reacted. Some ways of fighting distressed children: threats, personal insults, verbal hostility, defensiveness, hostile body language and one parent withdrawing. Others went with children feeling more secure: calm discussion, support and affection. A related study asked 175 US children aged eight to sixteen and 327 Welsh children aged eleven and twelve how they would feel about different ways parents argue; the same tactics came out as destructive or constructive in both countries.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You probably heard us shouting last night. I'm sorry it was so loud. It wasn't about you, and we're working it out together. You can ask me anything about it."

The researchers' framework is called emotional security: children watch how conflict is handled to judge whether the family is stable. The disagreement itself is not the main signal; the tactics and the ending are.

What the words do

Take 2 confirms what he heard, so he doesn't have to pretend. "I'm sorry it was so loud" owns the part that frightened him, without blaming the other adult. "It wasn't about you" and "we're working it out together" answer the two questions children this age tend to sit with. "You can ask me anything" keeps the subject open, and you can decide later how much detail fits.

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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2. Goeke-Morey, M. C., Cummings, E. M., Harold, G. T., & Shelton, K. H. (2003). Categories and continua of destructive and constructive marital conflict tactics from the perspective of U.S. and Welsh children. Journal of Family Psychology, 17(3), 327–338.
3. Davies, P. T., & Cummings, E. M. (1994). Marital conflict and child adjustment: An emotional security hypothesis. Psychological Bulletin, 116(3), 387–411.
4. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
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7. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
8. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

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.