

SOLVING NEIGHBOURHOOD DISPUTES

Trading fists for a friendly chat is the best way to tackle neighbourhood disputes according to new research. Getting neighbours to sit down and talk about their problems is an increasingly effective way of resolving disputes.

With greater pressures and time constraints on working families, people are simply not taking the time to get to know their neighbours and as a result conflicts in neighbourhoods are on the rise. Property lines, loud stereos, run down projects, garbage, undisciplined children, pets and late night noise are the more common issues.

While some disputes are serious most are totally absurd but even absurd cases can lead to serious financial losses, criminal charges and disruptions in people's lives. "Love thy Neighbour" is an often quoted teaching, but civil courts are clogged with complaints where neighbours are just plain nasty or unreasonable.

Here are some examples of steps you can take to resolve issues quickly, fairly and reasonably.

- **Common Courtesy** Get to know your neighbour, invite them to your party, warn them about parking congestion if you arrange get-togethers. If you have a tree that drops leaves or needles on their lawn offer to rake their yard and/or to dispose of the leaves.
- **Make Friends** As a result of helping each other during common disasters such as snow storms or power outages many neighbourhoods are made stronger by new found friendships. It is much easier to deal with a problem after you have extended a helping hand in disaster.
- **Don't let things fester** When a problem arises, talk to your neighbour in a calm way! Try to find a neutral place to discuss the problem like the sidewalk, neighbourhood park or while they are in the yard. Going to the door often makes a person defensive since they sense this is an invasion.
- **Check the law** There are many local laws governing noise, pets, eyesores, accumulation of junk vehicles. If you have questions call your local by-law office. Sometimes a short note accompanied by a photocopy of the by-law will do the trick. *Remember not all irritations are governed by law but a little information can make us more tolerant.*
- **Have an attorney write a letter for you** Sometimes if diplomacy fails, a letter from a lawyer can be effective. It will not cost much if you bring the particulars to the lawyer in an organized manner.
- **Enlist support** No one wants to confront the offender alone, especially if they have been rebuffed before. If the problem affects a number of neighbours, a letter with 5 or 6 signatures can carry more weight and avoid anyone being singled out as a "troublemaker". Do not have more

- than one member per household sign and **do not exaggerate**. Speak with your neighbourhood association.
- **Think before you call the police** There are times when law enforcement is appropriate but often by-law enforcement or zoning officials can address the problem more effectively. It can be much more difficult to mediate an issue after the police have been brought in.
 - **Find a Go-Between** A neighbourhood association, mediation service or Dispute Resolution Centre can assist in resolving the issue in a civilized and courteous manner and since the parties have worked out the agreement themselves the results are more lasting. 90% of disputes put before a Dispute Resolution Centre are resolved with little costs to the participants.
 - **Head for Court** if your neighbour will not talk with you, agree to mediation or respond to correspondence, court may be your only option. If no criminal charges such as threats, assault or harassment are involved then civil court is appropriate and often times you can represent yourself at no cost except for filing fees. Unfortunately going to court can result in the losing party becoming bitter, (make sure you are in the right before taking this step, you could end up the loser). There is no win-win in court.
 - **Don't Exaggerate** Nothing will doom a possible solution more than an exaggeration of the problem
 - **Don't make disrespectful or discriminatory remarks about a person's gender, religion, race, age, nationality or family** Stick to the relevant facts

All this takes a little willingness to sit down and listen, put yourself in the other person's shoes, talk things through respectfully, and do it as soon as you can.

Adapted from Lynwood Police Department Community Education – Lynwood Washington, The Scottish Office, www.scotland.gov.uk and Living in Concord, City of Concord, California

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