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How to Teach Negotiation

My daughter was a little over two when we moved back to the U.S from Switzerland. The enormity of U.S. toy stores overwhelmed her and it seemed that she wound up crying every time we entered one. She wanted everything. So I had what I thought was a clever idea. I told her that she could have two toys of her choice but that if she cried she couldn't get any at all. We talked about it and it was clear that she had understood what I had said. She ran around the toy store and ended up selecting three toys. I told her one would have to go back -- that our agreement was two. She started crying hysterically. I then said she had to put them all back as she had violated our *no crying* agreement. All of sudden, she sucked up all her tears and said in a breathless voice: *I'm not crying now*. I said that we would compromise on one toy.

That was possibly her first lesson in negotiating. I say possibly because kids and parents negotiate all the time. She and I are still negotiating. Now it is about when she will come to visit or when she will send her son down to visit or a range of other family issues.

Negotiation is so important that it is nearly absurd to ask how we teach negotiation. We can learn it by copying of course, which I did when I watched my father get a good price on a used car I was buying that I was ready to pay much more for. But really we negotiate with our wives and children and friends and co-workers all the time.

It is possible to teach negotiation of course. My team once built a course on negotiation working with a Harvard Law professor^[1] who taught negotiation. The course worked by having people negotiate. The situations were artificial so there is some question as to how valuable lessons can be learned from negotiating when nothing important (except ego) depends on it. What I found most interesting about that course were the stories that the expert told from his life as a professional negotiator. I can't say that I was ever able to personally make use of the lessons that those stories taught, but other people's experiences are interesting to think about. In the end, what we really know about negotiation is what has worked well for us in the course of our lives when we were negotiating. Coaching can help of course, which implies that the best way to teach negotiation would be with a mentor watching you do it for real and offering tips.

Psychologists perform this service in couple's counseling and presumably real estate agents perform this service for home buyers and sellers. Just in time advice is always helpful.

[1] Roger Fisher author of *Getting to Yes*

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