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## Kevin Maher



### Did I really need to shout, 'We're not living in Aleppo'?

**T**errifying news from the world of educational research. Apparently our children's brainpower can be increased exponentially through the power of some well-delivered backchat. No, really. According to a study from the Education Endowment Foundation, arguing is the key.

Apparently, when you teach kids to argue properly, over a period of two months with their classmates and those around them, they start to demonstrate improvement in subject knowledge, test results and intellectual ability. This is, obviously, a revolutionary discovery, and no doubt "double arguing" is only weeks away from entering the timetable of every schoolchild across the land.

However, when faced with the prospect of having three young, smart nit-pickers following me around in my home, and deconstructing every

utterance with glee, my response to this study can only be, "I'm OK, here. I'll just stick with thick but compliant children thank you very much."

Obviously, I don't have much time for arguing. At least not for the arguing that you do out loud. It always seems incredibly futile, needlessly confrontational, and fundamentally specious. Go on, be honest. You're never really arguing about the ostensible focus of the argument. That's just the cover story.

For instance, when you walk into the house of an evening and you roar about the dishes not being loaded into the dishwasher, what you're really saying is: "I'm tired, I'm hungry and I need a hug." When you find yourself in a roadside face-off with the guy who has shot out in front of you in his BMW, almost causing a collision, what you're really saying is, "I was genuinely scared back there. I wasn't expecting that. My heart's still racing."

And when you're spitting fury in the back garden, arguing with the plumber who's just charged you (as



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happened to me) £220 to unblock a drain cover (literally, five minutes' work), what you're really saying is, "Nope, sorry, that's bang out of order."

Point being, arguing is upsetting and mostly ineffectual for everyone

involved. Unless you happen to be lucky enough to be arguing with a complete dolt, you're never going to profoundly change your opponent's mind. Our beliefs are what define us and keep us sane. To change them, for most of us, is a seismic issue.

Take me. My last real humdinger was a few weeks ago. I was on a film set in north London and I began to argue with the parking attendant. I wanted to park my motorbike in one of the many (roughly 20) free spaces, but he insisted that I waited by my bike in the heat until the film set's inordinately complicated security system could verify my identity.

I then asked him if I could wheel my bike, engine off, the five feet to get to the nearest free space. No, he said, finger raised, shut-your-mouth style. I was not to move a muscle. I was genuinely baffled, and, to be honest, furious. I told him, while my own voice shook with emotion, that this was utter bullshit, and that we were not living in Aleppo, just yet.

His eyes nearly popped out on stalks and he reiterated his demand that I stay stock-still. I babbled some more about Aleppo (God knows why, maybe it was in the news that day). He ordered. I swore. He spoke into his walkie-talkie. I felt my heart rocket. Eventually I was cleared, and I parked the bike. I walked over to him later, and asked why he had been so difficult. He turned his back and said nothing.

On reflection, I realise that I should've said, "I'm sorry. I'm tired. I'm hungry. And I need a hug."

