

Parenting As a Team, Even When You Disagree

More often than not, parents have different ideas when it comes to raising kids.

Mom's instinct might be to say yes to most things, while dad's is no. Dad might think hours of television are okay, while mom would rather take the television out with the trash. Mom might prefer lots of negotiation while dad would rather say his answer once and have it stand.

The trick is not that you always agree, it's that you back each other up, and do so willingly. Yes, this takes a ton of negotiation and compromise, but there's a trick to make it easier. By carving such things as important rules and discipline techniques in stone you create a parenting plan — something to fall back on when you'd rather stamp your foot and roll your eyes at your spouse.

“It's a lot like accepting your spouse's quirks. While they might bother you, you agree to live with them. Parents need to do the same when it comes to decisions about raising kids,” says Dr. Brian Mesinger, a child psychologist with the Fort Collins Youth Clinic. When parents bring an attitude of compromise to the task, things go more smoothly. “You can even say, ‘I don't agree with you on this one, but I am going along because I trust you.’ Wow. How great a lesson in trust and unity is that for the kids?” says Mesinger.

Ideally, parents would draw up a contract as if they were in a business partnership. They would determine, and agree on, the steps needed to produce a high-functioning product. For example, they would outline the most important characteristics of their product, ranging anywhere from kind and empathetic to exhibiting good table manners. Once they came up with this list of desired traits, they'd outline the steps to create the product and begin methodically carrying them out.

While this may seem ridiculous, it isn't completely off the mark. “It's important for parents to discuss who they'd like their child to be and ways to get there. Some people plan their vacations with more energy and time than how they want their kids to turn out,” says Mesinger.

Agreeing To Agree: Creating A Parenting Plan

The first thing parents should discuss is the parenting style under which they were raised. “Talk about what your parents did right and what they did wrong. Think about what you'd like to carry into your family and what you never want to emulate,” says Mesinger. The discussion might include such items as your parents' discipline methods, their values and traditions, and how they carried them out. You might even discuss minor items such as childhood eating habits, chores, and leisure activities.

Once you've put the past on the table, turn back to the present. You might need a pencil and paper for this one. It involves recording, at least mentally, the rules of the roost. There's ease and consistency in knowing what's acceptable behavior and what's not. It also helps to know how to respond. That way, when kids rail against a rule, you know all you have to do is stand strong and that your partner will be doing the same. A simple, ‘Sorry, that's the way it is,’ will suffice.

Mesinger says there are three basic levels of ground rules. “First, there are the A items, the absolutes. These are the things you never tolerate a breach on, such as physical violence, bad language, or nasty back talk.” From there, you compile a list of B items. These are important, but not as life-defining. The B list might include chores, bedtime, curfews, and school goals. “B items probably demand a mild consequence if broken, but they don’t bring kids to the mat, like A items do.” Mesinger thinks older kids can have some say on B items, but parents need to mostly be in charge. C items are fairly inconsequential, such as kids not washing hands, table manners, or getting home a little late. C’s may or may not be addressed.

It’s good to be clear on which items are As, Bs, and Cs. Maybe mom values cleanliness to the extreme. If so, she may want making beds to be a B item while dad would have automatically put that on the C list.

“Once you lay the rules on the table, carry them out whole-heartedly, not begrudgingly,” says Mesinger. The key, again, is compromise. If your spouse wants table manners on the B list, accept it. Then maybe he’ll agree that your highly-valued rule of not raiding the fridge without asking can be put on the list as well. Remember, creating this list will be an ongoing task. “Parents need to reassess their rules as kids grow,” says Mesinger.

Finally, let’s temper this list-making task with the wider ideas of values, morals, and beliefs. “Parents can get lost in the mundane details of ‘Should we let him stay out until 9:00 or 10:00?’ It’s important to step back and take a philosophical look at how your child is progressing when it comes to family-held values and beliefs,” adds Mesinger.

Dealing With Disagreement

Now that we’ve agreed to agree, let’s get real: Disagreements happen.

But maybe they don’t have to tear parents apart. Maybe the trick is in how parents disagree. When done right, they can teach negotiation and respect rather than how to put-down or manipulate. For example, dad proposes a wrestling match right before bed, something mom doesn’t agree with. Instead of blurting out, ‘A wrestling match before bed? Are you crazy? You’ll wind them up and they’ll never get to sleep!’, mom could swallow these words and instead say, ‘A wrestling match is a fun idea, but it’s bedtime. How about if you come jump into our bed and tackle dad in the morning, instead?’ By choosing the second response rather than the first, mom avoids disrespecting dad’s idea and doesn’t put him down in front of the kids.

While this example may seem simple, it shows an attitude of mutual respect rather than a desire to get one’s way. All parents can take a breath and decide what’s a healthy response to the situation. Stopping to ask, ‘What’s the best response to this?’, helps parents make better choices. Another in-the-moment tip is to ask, ‘Am I focusing just on the issue at hand or the relationship as a whole?’ Focusing on the relationship instead of the current conflict pulls you out of the situation, making it easier to see it from both sides.

“Kids can live with differing rules and expectations from mom and dad. They really can,” says Mesinger. Kids intuitively know who to go to with certain questions or needs. “It’s totally okay for

kids to go to one parent for nurturing rather than the other, for example. That's because they are most likely getting a different need met by the other parent," says Mesinger.

Yet, when possible, it's best to agree. Or at least, agree to disagree and not chastise each other for your differing ways. Different rules are best tolerated when they involve minor rather than major issues. While differing on C items may be fine, differing on A items most likely will cause conflict.

Disagreements are inevitable, but constant disagreement and conflict isn't healthy. Ongoing disagreement can create a legacy of unresolved conflicts that build up until it feels like the walls of the house are going to burst. "The same thing can happen if one spouse feels like they always have to make up for the other or is constantly having to bite their tongue. The kids will definitely pick up on the disharmony," says Mesinger. At this point, the best thing to do is get help from the outside, such as marriage counseling or by taking parenting classes together.

"Some parents resist dealing with ongoing conflicts because their relationship may be shaky. If they pull one thread, it may all have to tumble out," says Mesinger. Even so, it's best to deal with ongoing conflict, despite the outcome.

Final Tips For A United Front

Want to hear the best way to create a united front? Preface each consequence or decision with these words: 'Your mom and I talked and we agree that....' "These are the best words a child can hear. They quickly draw a circle around the wagon," says Mesinger. Simply saying 'We' versus 'I' has the same effect.

Another technique is not letting kids push you for an answer. "Don't force yourself to make a quick decision. Instead, say 'Dad and I will discuss this and get back to you,'" advises Mesinger. Again, it tells kids their parents are united, but more importantly, it gives you time to make a good decision together.

You may even want to make a rule that if they push you for an answer, it will automatically be no. Mesinger made a rule with his own daughter that she couldn't ask him to decide something while she was talking on the phone. "I didn't want to be under that pressure," he says. Waiting to find out if they can go to a house party Saturday night also gives them time to think about whether or not it's something they really want to do.

While some discussions on parenting need to happen behind closed doors, Mesinger thinks it's okay to talk in front of the kids, even if you are disagreeing. "It's fine as long as there is some positive closure around it," says Mesinger. If done well, it teaches kids how to resolve conflicts in a healthy way. Plus, it eliminates a sense of secrecy within the house. "If you don't do it in front of them, they'll listen at the heat vent," jokes Mesinger.

Sometimes it works well simply to defer to your spouse. "If you have no strong feelings on a decision, give it to your spouse by saying, 'It's okay with me but clear it with mom, first,'" says Mesinger. It passes along the message that you trust your spouse to make the right decision.

When parents have a plan and know where they are going, they're more likely to stay on track. Looking something up in the proverbial rulebook is easier than creating it on the fly.

Besides, all that agreement leaves you with more energy to wrestle the kids. That is, if it's not bedtime.