



Parenting Conflicts

My spouse and I have different ideas on parenting. How can we find ways to agree?

As you and your spouse (or ex-spouse) share the responsibilities of parenting and managing the family's day-to-day activities, problems will arise. Here are a few of the most common difficulties that today's parents encounter and how you can handle them:

Inconsistency

Often parents differ in their rules and expectations for their child. Mom might say, "You can't watch TV until your homework is finished"; but when she's away, Dad may say, "Go ahead and watch TV if you want to." Dad might insist that the child's bedtime is 8:30; Mom may say that stretching it until 9:00 is fine.

Similar conflicts can develop over issues like approaches to discipline or a child's choice of friends. When these inconsistencies occur, one parent inevitably undermines the authority of the other.

To begin to resolve this problem, you and your spouse need to be explicit with each other about what your rules and expectations are. If necessary, write them down, review them and be sure they are workable. In areas in which you differ, find a compromise that you both can live with - and stick by it.

Non-Communication

If you and your spouse do not talk about the issues the family faces, one of you may be left out of important matters you should be informed about.

To avoid this situation, you and your spouse need to commit yourselves to communicate about every significant issue in your family life. At least once a day the two of you need to check in with each other and discuss what happened that day that was important. At the same time, talk about long-term issues that may be confronting the family.

Confusion

Uncertainty about what stands to take and what rules to impose can create turmoil within the family. Too often, parents are perplexed about issues like the degree of supervision required for their children and the amount of freedom to give them. Parents frequently do not make decisions at all, and that can leave their children puzzled and dismayed over what is expected of them.

You and your spouse need to resolve your own ambivalence on important family matters and agree on a position on these issues. Then you must clearly inform the entire family about your decisions and how their own lives will be affected by them.

Competition

Sometimes rivalry can develop between parents over their children's attention and love. If Dad wants his daughter to spend Saturday afternoon fishing with him but Mom wants her to go shopping with her, they may struggle to get their way, putting the child in an unenviable position, right in the middle of the conflict.

The two of you need to find ways to cooperate, not compete, with each other. That doesn't mean you have to agree on everything; but it does mean that you are committed to working together toward a more harmonious relationship and family life, and you are not going to let differences undermine your common goals. Each of you needs to demonstrate some flexibility.

form ground rules for the family, identify the areas in which each parent excels. That parent should then exert ship in the areas of his or her strength, so the decision-making responsibilities are divided within the family.

Overt Conflict

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Too often, parents argue and openly challenge each other on family-related matters. Perhaps their child has gotten into trouble at school, and the parents disagree about how to handle it; the mother may think the child should be grounded, while the father believes it wasn't her fault. They start to argue - sometimes for hours or even over a period of days - and eventually, rather than resolving the problem amicably, one parent wins out because the other ultimately gives in, at least for the moment. Nevertheless, the parental power struggle often begins all over again at a later time with a different issue, with some of the same anger from the previous conflict resurfacing. The wounds never fully heal and the animosity builds.

Clearly, this is not a healthy situation. Parents need to learn the skills of conflict resolution. These include:

- Listening
- Clarifying points of difference
- Taking each other's feelings seriously
- Generating alternative solutions together
- Negotiating

Remember, the way you handle conflict in your family is how your child learns to manage disagreement. Many community colleges offer seminars and courses on conflict resolution.

The Impact of Marital Problems

Interpersonal relationships do not exist in a vacuum. If you and your spouse are having marital difficulties, they are likely to disrupt the entire family. When your marriage is not going well ([/English/family-life/family-dynamics/types-of-families/pages/Divorce-What-Should-You-Tell-the-Children.aspx](#)), your parenting skills and your children will suffer.

The adults in the most successful families do not neglect marital problems. They commit themselves to spending time together as a couple and working together to resolve any misunderstandings, jealousies or conflicts. They make a commitment to communicate, praise, and forgive each other; they try to understand each other; and they routinely examine their relationship and how it can be improved.

Sometimes children are a convenient excuse for not dealing with serious marital difficulties. Parents may think, "The kids require so much of our attention now; once they're grown, we'll have a lot of time to talk about the problems we have in our own relationship." But that is a prescription for marital and parenting disaster. Problems tend only to become worse with time, and once your children are grown, you may not have much of a foundation to build on - if you are still together at all. So don't be complacent and let problems persist without attempting to solve them.

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