



by Karen Stephens

When Parents Disagree on How to Discipline

Families can weather occasional parenting differences. But when discipline styles are vastly different, children suffer as does the parent partnership. Discipline disagreements that regularly spin out of control threaten children's sense of trust, security, and stability. Children know when their behavior is the center of conflict, so they suffer guilt, too.

When the outcome of a discipline decision will have small impact on family harmony and children's well-being, parents often take turns bowing to each other's preference. One parent often defers to the other's wishes based on past experiences or perceived expertise. For instance, a parent who played an instrument as a child may be granted final say on how to discipline a child who avoids practicing.

For overall family harmony, it's wise to plan ahead on ways parents can cope with differing discipline beliefs. Dr. Connor Walters, certified Family Life Educator at Illinois State University, recommends the following as first steps.

Before You Face a Discipline Disagreement

- Early in childrearing (if not before!), parents should talk about child discipline beliefs and their goals for discipline. Following are questions to discuss: What values do you want to encourage in children? Do you want children to learn self-control and become self-directed? Is your goal for children to become sensitive to the feelings and needs of others? Do you hope children will learn to take responsibility and accept the consequences of their behavior?
- Next, analyze how your child-rearing methods support or work against the goals you discussed.
- Create a plan for developing a shared set of rules and consequences.
- Once agreed upon, post your family rules and limits. Once children are old enough, have them participate in establishing the rules to motivate cooperation.
- Have a plan for revisiting rules, limits, and consequences when they need to be adjusted to children's increasing ages or abilities.

When Parents Disagree on Discipline

- Ask why the other parent wants to discipline in a particular way.
- Listen to their response without interrupting. Be respectful, caring, and patient.
- Find out how the other parent wants the child to behave in the future.
- Find out what the other parent is afraid will happen if he/she *doesn't* discipline their particular way.
- Ask *yourself* why you are opposed to your parenting partner's method. What are *you* afraid will happen?
- Cooperatively problem-solve. Explore discipline options, balancing the pros and cons. Decide which responses are most constructive for your parenting goals.

Communicate positively about conflicting views

All that dialogue takes patience and stamina, but it's invaluable. In the heat of conflict, responding positively takes a lot of self-control. To help you follow Dr. Walter's recommendations, I offer some tips for respectful and constructive communication. I hope they help when times get tough.

“Early in childrearing, parents should talk about child discipline beliefs and their goals for discipline.”

- Keep parent communication open. Address and resolve issues when they are small and more manageable. Pushing a problem under a rug doesn't hide it; it can then incubate into a bigger problem. For instance, if one parent is a short-fused *yeller*, address the pattern before it turns into frequent rants and rages.
- Discuss disagreements in a calm, private setting. Picking the right time and place is important. Public displays, or choosing a holiday dinner for conflict fuels discord. If someone is under the influence of a mood altering drug, delay the talk until everyone is sober.
- Pledge to discuss differences based on specific behaviors, not personalities. Avoid character assassination. Rather than name-calling, talk about the behavior that concerns you. Express feelings and reasons for them: "I'm worried Jack will think of himself as dumb if you keep teasing him about his forgetfulness. What's something else we can try?" Rather than telling your co-parent he/she is an "over-indulgent spoiler," try something less igniting: "When you don't require Jessie to pick up her own toys, I'm afraid she won't learn to be responsible."
- Settle problems one at a time. Come to agreement first on the things that have the greatest impact. Issues related to children's health (mental as well as physical) and safety issues rank high.
- Stay in the present. Don't rehash *old* conflicts during every disagreement. The exception is when trying to explain perceived patterns of behavior. Even then, carefully stick to the point or you'll careen off course.
- Don't jump to conclusions. Each parent deserves a chance to explain their own views.
- Agree upon a signal you can use when you think a discussion is spiraling into a spiteful fight rather than a sincere effort to reach compromise. Resolving conflict will only be successful if you control anger and resist the urge to simply tell each other off.
- When disagreements arise, don't go days without talking. Put aside pride and admit talk has to start a resolution. Resist *game-playing* moves. For instance, don't ask your child to speak to the other parent on your behalf: "Bobbie, tell your mother to me pass the butter." That puts children in the middle of parent conflict and undermines security. It's also a poor role model of mature communication.
- Avoid discussing conflict in the heat of a big power struggle. Take *cool down* time to regain composure, then literally set a time to sit and discuss things rationally. This might be in a half hour or after a good night's sleep.
- Speak respectfully to each other; avoid accusing, blaming, demeaning, or belittling the other's ideas or beliefs. Avoid bad-mouthing grandparents' parenting: "You're just like your mother." It may be true, but it's better to address the behavior than to stir up defensiveness and wounded pride.
- Control your non-verbal communication wisely. Tone of voice and facial expression should convey the *same* message as your words. Mixed messages lead to confusion and escalate conflict. Eye-rolling or other gestures undermine communication even if you do say all the *right* words.
- If you absolutely can't talk it out, try to write it out. Writing a letter to your co-parent helps you sort out your issues, organize your thinking, and gain a better perspective of both points of view.
- Control your behavior. Refuse to give in to anger by throwing something or pushing someone — or worse. If differences boil over into a case of domestic violence — get help! Domestic violence is very damaging to kids. Family therapists are in the phone book, as are agencies for domestic violence victims.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

© Karen Stephens 2007