

## **When Mom and Dad Disagree on Discipline**

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As long as there have been parents and kids, there have been disagreements about discipline. Often this is a combination of which parent was first to witness the crime, how passionately each feels about the inappropriate behavior, the temperament and frustration tolerance differences between Mom and Dad, who is spending more time with the kids on a daily basis (and is therefore either more fed-up or oblivious to the behavior) and finally who feels most guilty about not spending enough time with the kids each day and chooses to let the little stuff go. Throw in the individual child's nature, history of dastardly deeds vs. cooperation, age level and a slew of other factors and the discipline debate can easily get out of hand. And, if you really want to complicate the matter add to the equation whether the misdeed took place in public or at home. Now, what do you do?

### **Develop basic rules and understandings:**

1. Realize that disagreeing with your spouse or partner about child discipline is normal and inevitable. It doesn't mean that you are incompatible as parents or that you should head to the attorney's office. It does mean that you are not clones of each other. Don't let lack of agreement evolve into more than it is.
2. Agree to disagree. If you back off on this one, let your spouse know that all things being roughly equal on the next stalemate (and there will be a next one!), that you're decision may prevail.
3. Appropriate debate in front of the kids can be a growth experience. It's okay for your children to witness their folks discussing, disagreeing and resolving an issue (and that could include flipping a coin and letting the winner call the shot). In fact, if accomplished appropriately, it's an excellent life lesson. Learning the skills of listening, restating the problem, considering both sides of an argument and coming to a resolution is an invaluable set of tools that your children can employ as they mature through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.
4. Unfair fighting is *never* a good life lesson. Witnessing parents sniping, bullying, screaming or giving the cold shoulder is frightening to children, and teaches them to avoid or to abuse disagreements. Don't go there, no matter how tempting it is to hit below the belt.
5. Decide *in advance* (as in right now!) what's really important in your family. I'm sure that you and your partner can agree on at least a handful of issues that you'll always concur are important and should be handled in a certain manner. Many families consider health (ranging from wearing bicycle helmets to banning substance use), education (completing class work and homework in an appropriate manner), respect (at home, school and in the public), and honesty to be "givens". No ifs, ands or buts about these areas—negative consequences will be given by either parent if the child ventures into these forbidden areas. Determine typical consequences for these inappropriate behaviors—make them intense, important to the child and most of all—stick with them! Put the list of

- transgressions and associated consequences in writing and post in a highly visible place in your home.
6. If an unacceptable behavior occurs which is not on this list, then it's easier for parents to disagree about their course of action. Of course if you're the only parent at the scene, handle it in a manner that best fits the crime and move on. If both folks are available then perhaps the one who is most passionate about the issue (throwing food at the table, interrupting others, throwing a tantrum in public) can make the call. If the other parent disagrees please consider whether it's important enough to merit a discussion. We're not keeping score here folks, and if one parent happens to call more shots that day, it's okay. Where families get into trouble is when the balance of power and decision-making becomes skewed with one spouse doing most of the disciplining, whether they want to or not.
  7. If you continue to disagree with your spouse's handling (or lack of) the problem, begin with an "I message". "I feel uncomfortable when the kids become loud and disruptive in the back seat while driving. It's distracting and dangerous and I think that we need to give a punishment." This will likely be met with greater acceptance and less defensiveness by your spouse than a statement such as, "You always let the kids get away with everything! Why can't you punish them for cutting up in the back seat? You can't even stand up to your own children!" Ouch...point made.
  8. Face it; you can't always have a committee meeting on all kid disciplinary decisions. Convenience often calls for the parent who has the most time at the moment, or is less harried and stressed from the day, or has the inside scoop on what the transgression was but also what led to the flare up, or is calmer at the moment to be the one to make the disciplinary decision.

The bottom line is that the best disciplinary decision is made, not who made it. This is not about notches in the gun belt—it's about giving consequences that will lower the child's frequency of inappropriate behavior and raise the odds of acceptable behavior in the future. Pure and simple. If you feel that your spouse is coming on too strongly with the kids try giving a preset signal that means "we need to talk". My clients often use phrases such as "can you help me with the dishes?" or a key expression such as bunny rabbit or pickle face, to initiate taking it into another room to discuss.

If you feel that you are about to lose it, remember that you can never, ever delete the nasty statement, name calling or sharp criticism once it leaves your mouth. But, there's usually a way to buy time so that you can cool off and devise a fair, effective consequence that both spouses can live with. Try telling your child, "At this moment Dad and I can't agree what your punishment will be for sneaking the internet last night, but we'll let you know after dinner." That gives the two of you plenty of time to calmly and creatively weigh out the options—disabling the modem at bedtime and restricting instant messaging privileges for several months. Oh, the possibilities are endless! And, so much more effective when the focus remains upon the child's behavior rather than the bickering between Mom and Dad.

