



WHEN SPOUSES DISAGREE ABOUT DISCIPLINE Advice from Nancy Samalin

The “united front” is an unrealistic goal when raising children. It’s normal for parents to disagree occasionally about discipline. After all, Mom and Dad aren’t joined at the hip. Each has individual temperaments, preferences, and priorities.

So how can you work as a team to set clear, consistent standards for your kids? How can you avoid sending mixed messages or letting them play one of you against the other? **The key:** Strive for common ground and compromise rather than a false united front. Here are some guidelines:

Accept and respect your differences. Each of you had a different set of parents. Your spouse may have grown up in a laid-back family with few rules, while your parents may have been drill sergeants. Whether we replicate or reject our own parents’ disciplinary methods, our childhood experiences influence the way we raise our own kids today. It’s important for both parents to recognize and respect each other’s differences before you can work as a team with a common game plan.

Discuss your styles with each other. Are you more authoritarian and your spouse more permissive? What issues or behaviors really bother you? Dawdling at bedtime? Picky eating habits? Messy rooms? What gets under your spouse’s skin? Backtalk? Homework? Ignoring you? For example, does one of you have strong beliefs about healthy eating, while the other lets the kids eat junk food?

Helpful: Reach an agreement – before these problems erupt – that the parent with the stronger opinions about a particular issue will handle that situation. For example, the next time Sallie refuses to clean her room, it’s Mom’s job to dish out a consequence because that’s Mom’s area of concern and it bothers **her** while Dad isn’t very concerned about that issue.

Agree to disagree – but in private. When your spouse handles a disciplinary problem in a way you don’t approve of, bite your tongue for the moment. Don’t contradict or undermine your spouse by disagreeing in front of your child. Later on, you can say something like, “I know Billy’s behavior really got to you, but I wonder if there might be a different way to handle it next time.” I know he can be very provocative.

Have a plan. You know from past experience how your kids are likely to behave, or misbehave, in certain situations. For example, when they’re watching a favorite TV show, they’ll probably whine and beg you to let them stay up for the next program even when they know it runs beyond their bedtime. Talk to your spouse about these predictable problems and formulate a strategy in advance for how to handle them. Being prepared is far more effective – and less stressful -- than reacting when you’re caught off guard.

Avoid falling for the “divide and conquer” game that kids play so well. (Otherwise known as “If Mom says NO, go to Dad to try for a YES.”)

Helpful: Establish this clear rule: When one parent says “no,” children cannot appeal to the other parent for an overruling. If they try this divide-and-conquer strategy, it’s a rule-breaker and there will be a consequence. Make certain your kids understand this rule; remind them of it; and enforce it when they break it.

Stay out of the middle. When your child pleads with you to intervene in a conflict he/she has with your spouse, don't jump into the fray. Simply say, "That's between you and your Mom. You need to work it out with her." Encourage your child to discuss the situation directly with the other parent. (This is important in all families, but particularly so when parents are divorced or the child lives in a blended family.)

Remember that kids often try to play one parent against the other in the hope that the resulting conflict will divert your attention and they'll get what they want.

Buy some time. When your child has a disagreement with or a complaint about the other parent and you're caught unaware of the details, you don't have to respond with an instant verdict or opinion. Instead, you could say, "We'll discuss it and get back to you." The same can be said when a child makes a request that you want to discuss with your spouse before giving the child an answer.

Be honest about your differences. With older children especially, you can explain that parents might not always agree – "Mom and I don't feel the same way about that" – but both parents will consider the issue and reach a compromise.

When you do argue, fight fair. Try as you might to work as a team, it's inevitable that at times you'll openly disagree with your spouse. When that happens, here are some tips to deal with it:

Avoid name-calling and sarcasm when you're upset. As you feel your anger rising, take some time out to cool off and revisit the problem later. Don't attack or blame your spouse, e.g. "You *always* let her get away with bloody murder..." or "You never back me up, so they think I'm the bad guy..."

Instead, state how you feel: "I get angry when the kids always see me as the disciplinarian and you as the warm, fuzzy teddy bear..." or "I wish I got more support from you when they're hassling me..." Listen to each other's viewpoints and then try to negotiate a solution that you can both live with.

Don't "faturize" by criticizing your spouse's approach as though it will necessarily lead to a negative outcome (as in, "If you let her get away with that, she'll turn into a spoiled brat...")

When children witness Mom and Dad fighting about disciplinary issues, be sure to let them know that it's okay to disagree, but that each parent respects the other. Let them witness your apologies to each other if you've lost your cool. Model behaviors that teach kids that people can express different opinions and emotions, but they can also play fair.

Reassure your kids that it's not their fault when you argue. Show them that you can disagree strongly but still love each other. Let them see that the two of you can make up after a conflict. Children can understand and accept different parenting styles – in fact it helps them learn about the range of human emotions and demonstrates the arts of compromise and problem solving.