

Mom's Way or Dad's Way



BY KAY KOSAK ABRAMS, PH.D.

Dear Dr. Kay:

My husband and I are forever arguing about how to manage our children. I believe in giving children empathy and room to make mistakes. My husband believes that most kids are spoiled these days, and they need to be disciplined. His idea of discipline is to yell and punish. I think he simply scares them into compliance. He thinks I am indulging my kids and undermining his authority. How do we get on the same page?

Parents who are invested in coping with their differences and modeling conflict resolution skills for the sake of their children can work to find a common ground.

Dear Parent:

This question is a hot topic in my *Parenting with Confidence* workshops. When parents react to each other by defending opposite ends of the parenting spectrum, they can end up polarized. Children might play off the differences and add to the divisive split. In the extreme, parents may come to feel like enemies rather than allies. In moderation, parental differences can be healthy. Our children can adapt to what each parent has to offer them developmentally.

As parents we have different personalities and backgrounds that come into play as we manage our children. The more we communicate and step back, the better able we are to take advantage of our differences in order to enrich our marriage *and* our parenting efforts. Most often, there is no “right and wrong” when it comes to Mom’s way vs. Dad’s way. There are two parents who are promoting different, but valid, viewpoints and values. The challenge is to respect and integrate both values. This requires taking the time to listen respectfully without defensiveness, in order to find compromise.

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skills for the sake of their children can work to find a common ground.

Children can, and have, adjusted to two different parenting styles for ages. Many children must adjust to four parents, plus grandparents, not to mention their teachers. There can be more than one system for setting up behavioral expectations. In fact, inconsistency from one parent is more confusing and more likely to result in anger and acting out than differences *between* parental authority. In other words, it can be more disruptive and confusing for a child who must respond to an adult who is inconsistent based on mood or random factors than for the child to adjust to a change from Mom's way to Dad's way.

If parents work together more than 60 percent of the time, parenting will be easier, no doubt. However, differences are natural and enriching. How the parents cope with their differences matters more the differences themselves. How we work with our partner is about our relationship skills. As I always remind parents, to parent with confidence requires clarity. This clarity comes from mindfulness, which means we need to take the time to think and

communicate effectively. Typically, what undermines our confidence and consistency is our hurried lives and subsequent impatience. Ineffective parenting happens when we yearn for "easy outs." Here are a few tips for how to parent with mindfulness when it comes to Mom's way vs. Dad's way.

- Remember that both partners are essentially "right." For example, your children need empathy in order to cooperate, and they need limit setting in order to make responsible choices. We can say to our 4-year-old, "Wow... wouldn't you just like to take every toy in the store... Just tell mom what you want on your 'wish list,' because today we are buying a birthday toy for your friend." Both empathy and limit setting work together.

- Parenting is simply easier, and you will be less at-risk for "let's make a deal" parenting when you have determined the rules. The rules stem from your values. If we take the time to think and discuss the topic of toys and shopping, we may decide not to take our kids shopping, or we may decide that they need to learn that shopping is not always about them. The rule follows the value or priority, such as

"When we go shopping, you can have one treat." Alternatively, "When we go shopping for a gift for a friend, we look only for our friend."

- Parenting effectively means to "know thyself and know thy child." A parent determines what works for his child. Perhaps one child adapts very well while running errands with Dad, but he "melts down" when he's with Mom. You naturally form decisions based on learning and collecting data. Some parents determine not to take their overly reactive toddler shopping. One parent has a greater capacity to ignore a tantrum than another parent. Make parenting decisions that optimize mastering success. It is important not to set ourselves up for frustration with unrealistic expectations. And, what works for Dad may be different than for Mom.

- Parents can take turns parenting in order to optimize time for themselves. Some evenings can be designated for Dad and not Mom. This can be a workable system that is communicated and remains consistent so that each parent gets time to go to yoga, watch the basketball game or have computer time. Similarly, each parent

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practices parenting without the intervening "other." Often times, Dad does better and learns his own lessons more effectively without Mom there to direct and correct.

- When one parent feels that her partner is parenting in a manner that is damaging to their child's self-esteem, it is best not to address this when the child is present. Bring it up later in a way that is supportive by empathizing with your partner's frustration, and listen extensively before offering advice. If there is a consistent pattern of parenting that could be perceived as emotionally harming, seek consultation with a third party who has expertise in parenting.

Self-esteem does not come from protecting children from normal expressions of frustration and conflict. Self-esteem comes from mastery and coping, including how to cope with frustration.

- Remember that your children need to adapt to the real world, and the real world is not perfect. Self-esteem does not come from protecting children from normal expressions of frustration and conflict. Self-esteem comes from mastery and coping, including how to cope with frustration. Children readily see that they can push parents too far, resulting in parents' anger. It is helpful to apologize to a child, as well as point out his responsibility in the negative cycle of noncompliance and frustration. Just make certain to tell your children the clear expectation for behavior (the rule). Then communicate the connections between his choice and your subsequent anger. Explain to your child how the appropriate behavioral choice can lead to a positive outcome in the future. And always be mindful of your own consistency.

To discipline is to teach. Parenting is less about scolding, punishing or deriving "consequences" than it is about directing and redirecting. Parenting is effective when we manage with clarity and calmness, rather than reactivity. Moms and dads may differ in their values or reasoning, and care should be taken to model mutual respect.

Most parents want to parent in a manner that integrates nurturance and responsibility.

However, when parents undermine each other and fight in front of the children about how to parent, they may unintentionally undermine their child's sense of trust and security. Furthermore, children are quite savvy about how to play off of parental differences in an opportunistic way. Adults do this, too, when management is weak. We are most effective and influential when we move our children forward with empathy and thought. Children adapt beautifully to Mom's way and Dad's way when the parenting styles are cohesively presented and mutually respected.

Kay Kosak Abrams is a psychologist in private practice in Garrett Park, Md. "Parenting with Confidence" coffeehouse sessions take place on-site at area schools, as well as on the second Wednesday of each month at the Garrett Park Town Hall, October through June. Visit www.kayabrams.com for more information.