

Feature: Couples Parenting: Pitfalls and Possibilities

By Deborah Fox

When two people get married and decide to have children, they rarely talk about the specifics of how they plan to raise these children. Most people have a “de facto” attitude that says, “My parents raised me x, y or z way and I turned out just fine and I’ll raise my kids that same way”. While the wonderful person they married has the same idea and attitude, but that parent was raised with a, b and c parenting. So the real problems begin when these two parents have a two-year old and their parenting styles begin to clash. What usually happens is that one parent tends to be more strict and the other parent tends to be more lenient. The strict parent gets angry when the lenient parent allows too much leeway. The lenient parent gets upset when the strict parent is too restrictive. So the strict parent gets stricter and the lenient parents gets more permissive until the parents are battling all the time over how to discipline. The children have a field day of misbehavior in this dynamic, learning to play one parent against the other and running amuck. The relationship between the parents is more important, that is how the two parents work together to raise the children, is a higher priority than the parenting skills of either parent.

While it would be great if parents could have conversations about the specific details of child-rearing, specifically how to handle discipline and behavior issues, most parents don’t have a context for this discussion until they are actually raising their own children. One of the pieces of advice I would give couples contemplating children would be to have many, “What would we do in this situation?” discussions. Observing other parents and their children and talking about how you would each prefer to handle the situation can give you a great deal of information about how your partner plans to parent your future children. For those of us already married, we can use this idea to gain more insight about our partner. In a situation where discussing your child becomes a battle, try looking at another parents issue with a child and discuss together how that parent could do things differently and what each of you would do in the situation. It is easier to know what someone else should do, so make sure to bring the discussion back to yourselves and see how you can apply that advice in the challenges you are facing with your children. For example, I had been having a difficult time know where to set boundaries with my 17 year old daughter. I wasn’t certain and how much involvement my husband, her step-dad, wanted or needed to have in the often heated discussions she and I had been having. A friend of ours was having similar, yet even more extreme issues with his son, and his wife, the step-mom, and my husband parent similarly. I asked my husband what he thought the step-mom’s role was, how much involvement she should have in the situation, and what she should do. His answers were very interesting, not what I had expected, and guided my decision about how much I could and should involve my husband in the issues between my daughter and I.

Once a couple has identified that they are undermining each other’s parenting, and are willing to work on it, there one main action that can bring the two of you back on track. If you have created the dynamic where one of you has become the strict one and the other the more lenient one, you may hate this advice, but it works. In fact, it’s the only way it can work to bring the two of you back on the same parenting team. Here it is: The strict parent gets to be the parenting leader. The lenient parent has to follow the lead of the strict parent in discipline situations**. You **cannot** do it in the reverse! If you follow this advice, what will happen is that the two of you will begin to move closer together. When the strict parent is supported, then he or she can stop over-compensating for the leniency of the other. The strict parent becomes more flexible and generous in parenting. When the lenient parent sees that the children are not suffering, and in fact are benefitting from the more firm rules and structure of the strict parent, the lenient parent can learn to be more firm in his or her parenting and come closer to being on the team with the strict parent. Now the two of you become both kind and firm parents, each support each other, feeling confident the other is disciplining the children with the best of intentions, actions and results. You can have beneficial discussions on what to do with the children, and each of you feel that you have someone on your side when the parenting gets tough. Doesn’t that sound much

better?

The children of a couple with a loving supportive relationship, and that back each other up as parents, but have marginal parenting skills will be better off than a couple that is at war but knows all the latest and greatest parenting tools and skills. That relationship is setting the example for how the entire family should be and as the role model and leader, it has more influence than just about any other dynamic in the family. So, if your relationship has taken a back seat to the kids, maybe it's time to schedule that date night again, spend more time at the beginning and end of each day connecting as a couple, and if necessary, get into some couples counseling. Those things can benefit your children much more than reading a parenting book or taking a parenting class. And do read the book and take the class --after you have re-committed to keeping your relationship on track!

****If the strict parent is abusive, please seek the help of a hotline, counselor or therapist, do not follow this advice**

Deborah has been teaching parenting classes and workshops for 15 years. She is passionate about parenting, relationships and children.