

Topic 40

When Parents Have Different Rules

CONSIDER THESE SITUATIONS: Mom does not object to her sixteen-year-old daughter getting a belly button ring, but Dad threatens to pack the teen up and send her to a convent if she does. Eight-year-old Tommy can stay up to watch wrestling on weekend visitation with Dad, but Mom restricts Tommy's television, puts him to bed earlier than Dad, and will not permit him to watch people flinging each other around and dropping them on their heads.

There are three major problems parents create when they do not agree on a common set of rules or limitations on their children.

Quick Tip: Do not allow behavior that you know the other parent disapproves of. If you feel that it is absolutely necessary to go against the co-parent, tell the co-parent first; don't let the child bring the news home.

- **Children will divide and conquer.** Children of divorced parents have a natural tendency to divide and conquer, which they will develop with increasing expertise as time goes on. Soon your child will convince you that the other parent has given permission for things when she has not, and you will be raising a child who is growing up to lie and manipulate.
- **Children choose leniency.** When children encounter a choice that doesn't involve consulting either parent (for instance, "Should I smoke this joint?"), the child, having had an experience with one parent who is more lenient (it doesn't have to even be the same parent every time), will choose the less

responsible option. That is because the child is accustomed to having a less responsible or strict option.

- **Disobedience is reinforced.** When children can “cancel” one rule from one parent with permission from another parent, children are reinforced for being disobedient. This ultimately makes it easier for them to be disobedient to both parents.

Quick Tip: Do not encourage your child to bring pets or other living things home to the other parent’s house without asking first.

Imagine what you would do if you worked for two bosses, each of whom had equal power over you but for much of the time disagreed as to what your job responsibilities and expectations were. Assume that for all of your job tasks, one boss or the other would always require more work of you. It would not take long for you to figure out how to interact with those bosses in such a way as to keep your job but actually work as little as possible given the choices each would present. It would also be a very difficult environment for you to work in because you would always be annoyed at one of your bosses.

How to Agree on One Set of Rules

If there is an area of co-parenting that requires making concessions and really working with the co-parent, this is it. Even if you have only an ounce of patience with your co-parent, dedicate it here. Sit down with your co-parent (and, if necessary, a neutral third party) and have a comprehensive face-to-face discussion about behavioral dos and don’ts for your children. Know what you are going to discuss, make a list, and go through each item. Be prepared to compromise here and there for the sake of creating a well-defined list of rules and consequences. There is room for variation on things like bedtimes and curfews, as long as the variations are minor, like a 9:00 bedtime at one parent’s home and an 8:30 bedtime at the other’s.

Quick Tip: Both parents' rules can be similar (in other words, they don't have to be equal to the letter), but they should be equivalently strict, or your children are going to learn how to take advantage of the differences.

When You Can't Agree on One Set of Rules

Regardless of how important you think it is to have a common set of goals and rules, the other parent may refuse to enforce them. The inevitable outcome is that if you are the stricter of the two parents, your child will complain that you are unfair, unreasonable, unlikable, and unsympathetic. Parents often feel that the best way of replying to these complaints is by saying something sarcastic like "I'm sorry if your mother [father] doesn't care about the way you grow up. I do, so when you are here you will do it my way."

Instead, try being sympathetic to the fact that the child is getting mixed signals from you and the co-parent. You can say something like this instead: "I don't blame you for being annoyed at the fact that you have to live by two different sets of rules. I would feel the same way. I will try to consider what you think is fair, but I can't always agree. When you are at your mother's [father's], you might be permitted to do things you cannot do in this house. I have to try to set the rules that I think are best for you when you are here, because when you are here you are my responsibility, and I have to set down the rules that I am comfortable with."

Sometimes when we give messages to our children, the most important ones do not sink in right away but still have a profoundly positive influence on the way they grow up. What I am recommending is that you acknowledge your child's feelings and concentrate on your role as a caregiver. Your child may continue to complain, but he will be forced to try to understand your position, as you have demonstrated that you understand your child's position.

Better still, avoid having to deal with this conflict at all by making every attempt to get on the same page as your co-parent and cooperatively disciplining your children.

Topic 41

Discipline Problems Related to Divorce

CHILDREN CAN HAVE discipline difficulties related to their parent's divorce that show themselves in three major ways.

- **Preexisting problems get worse.** Preexisting or long-standing discipline problems that are not necessarily related to divorce are made worse by the divorce or separation.
- **Children act out.** Children are angry, disappointed, frustrated, or conflicted by aspects of their parents' divorce and therefore tend to act out.
- **Children learn negative behavior.** Children watch how their parents behave toward one another, and can in this way learn to be rude, insensitive, hostile, physically violent, disrespectful, and argumentative, to name only a few problem behaviors.

Let's look at each of these discipline problems a bit more closely.

Preexisting Problems

Preexisting problems may exist because a child has a very difficult-to-manage behavioral style or temperament. There are some children who are predisposed to behavioral problems that arise from stubbornness, noncompliance, or aggressiveness in their genetic makeup. It is important for parents to know that their children are difficult and require specialized parenting techniques as opposed to simply blaming the divorce or blaming one another.

It is especially important for parents to cooperate in seeking appropriate intervention from counselors and therapists who specialize in this type of parenting. Preexisting problems are often made much worse by parenting conflicts. Difficulties related to the child erode the co-parenting relationship, while difficulties in the co-parenting relationship worsen the child's behavioral problems. Reducing these conflicts can improve both parents' ability to manage difficult behavior in children. High-conflict parents must choose whether it is more important to keep trying to get back at the other parent or to try to improve the behavior and ultimate success of their difficult child.

Acting Out

Sometimes the divorce is the sole issue that creates the foundation for most, if not all, of a child's disciplinary problems, as well as problems such as anxiety and depression. Children of divorced parents often discover that their disciplinary problems are the only things that bring their parents into the same room or same house to talk. This can reinforce the child's fantasy that Mom and Dad will get together again. The best way to approach this situation is to seek family counseling, in which this dynamic is likely to come to light.

If you are in this situation, you and your co-parent must do your best to communicate that you will always work as a team to make sure the children are healthy and happy, but that does not mean you will get back together. Some children have a difficult time forgiving their parents for separating. This can happen even when parents have a cordial relationship with one another, because it is difficult for kids to understand why people who can be nice to one another could not remain together.

Quick Tip: Kids will act out as a way of trying to bring their parents back together. If you think this is the case, sit down with your children and tell them that their acting out will not bring you together—it will just make each one of you worry about them more.

Negative Learned Behavior

By far, the worst influence on a child's behavior (which then affects parents' ability to control and manage that behavior) is the behavior parents model when they engage in a high-conflict relationship. Children imitate not only specific behaviors of their parents, but the style in which their parents treat others. Children also repeat aspects of their parents' behavior toward one another in their friendships and early dating relationships. If you and the co-parent curse each other and call each other names, do not be surprised when your child does the same to you when you displease her. If you and the co-parent are aggressive to one another, do not be shocked when your children are rough or violent with one another. If you end your arguments by storming out of the room and slamming the door, ask yourself what good it does to punish a child for ignoring you and walking away from your reprimands, after seeing the way you handle your difficulties.

In all of these cases, you would do best to join a divorced parenting discussion group, read more books on divorced parenting, or consult a professional.