

Secrets to parenting together, not apart

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A couple approached me after a recent parenting presentation asking for my thoughts around kids and mealtimes.

It seems they had different approaches.

One parent was focused on food and was concerned with the quantities kids ate. The other was focused more on behaviour and was more concerned with the quality of social interactions that mealtimes offered.

From my perspective, mealtimes are more than a mere pitstop for food. They offer a great opportunity for family members to talk, while bottoms are anchored to chairs. That's why the TV needs to be turned off during mealtimes.

During our brief chat it seemed that both parents respected the other's viewpoint, which was fantastic. But they clearly had some differences in their approach to parenting, that may not have been evident before the chat.

Differences in parenting approaches are natural reflecting past parenting experiences, gender differences and experience of children.

Differences are healthy, a sign of independent thinking, and can provide a sense of balance to family life.

BUT different approaches can cause discomfort, stress and anxiety to one or both parents, particularly when communication and empathy levels are down.

In some cases, the differences can lead to inconsistent parenting where there is no agreement on rules and standards of behaviour and inconsistent follow-through when kids behave poorly.

Parents who work together need to know when to compromise, when to keep out of the way and when to present a united front. Knowing when to take each approach takes practice and depends on what the issues are, your parenting styles and your individual values.

The 3 levels of parenting together

Getting on the same page as your partner takes work. It can be done whether you and your partner live together or not.

There are three levels of partnering working together:

Level 1 - Managerial: This is the day-to-day parenting level that focuses on aspects such as standards of behaviour, kids' health, education and supervision. Usually one parent (mothers mostly) is the primary parents calling the shots, while the other takes a back seat as the secondary parent (dads mostly). The secondary parent usually follows the lead of the primary parent. Level 1 focuses on WHAT needs to be done to raise kids.

Level 2 – Child-rearing: This is a tricky area as it covers approaches to kids' behaviour, how to build confidence in kids, the processes parents put in place for communication and how kids treat others. My conversation with the young couple I mentioned above was around this level. Level 2 fundamentally concerns itself with HOW kids are raised.

Level 3 – Values and attitudes: This is the BIG picture level. It looks at fundamental things you value such as developing independence, responsibility, tolerance, persistence and respect in kids. These are just a few -there are plenty of values and attitudes to develop. It really helps when partners are on the same wavelength when it comes to the things you value. This level concerns itself with WHY you do the things you do as parents. When you know the WHY then the HOW of parenting becomes easier.

From my experience you can get away with parental differences when kids are young, however it does become a big problem as kids move into adolescence. Some teenagers can become adept at driving a wedge between parents who are on different wavelengths. They generally go to the parent who will give them the answer they require when it comes to the tricky areas such as going out, access to alcohol and relationship issues.

It pays to start the conversation about parenting early on kids' lives. That's why I love it when parents come to a parenting seminar together. You both hear the same message, and hopefully, this generates healthy conversations about your kids and parenting. These conversations, generally start off around Level 2 issues (how you do things) but involve Level 3 issues (why you do the things you do).

Conversations at the WHY level are more fundamental, leading to greater understanding of where the other person comes from and the likelihood of presenting a united front to kids. And getting on the same page as your partner is always in the best interests of your kids.

The funny thing is, most parents are so busy talking about Level 1 issues (what you are doing) that they rarely talk meaningfully about Level 3 issues (why you are doing things), which is the absolute guts of what you do unless you purposefully sit down and

do so. Parenting education provide the opportunity for getting conversations going that get you and your partner on the same page as parents.