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## At loggerheads over best ways to parent:



Children can tolerate differing parenting styles but constant conflict is damaging, writes **JOHN SHARRY**

*“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success”*

– Henry Ford

ONE OF the biggest challenges of parenting with a partner is the fact that on many occasions you will have different ideas on how to bring up your children. Mothers and fathers come with different personalities, different family backgrounds, and different ideas on what is important and this can lead to regular conflict in the parenting stakes. In fact, one of the most common arguments between couples is about how to bring up their children and their different parenting styles.

This seems to be the case whether the parents are married or cohabiting, and even whether they are living together or not (as in the case of separation or divorce). We often hear about how important it is for parents to work as a team or to present a united front to the children. To use a popular metaphor parents are often advised that they should learn to “sing off the same hymn sheet” so they can act in unison and employ the same approach.

While at face value this is of course good advice, what I have come to realise is that it is far more important that parents should support each other’s different or unique way of parenting rather than necessarily parenting exactly the same way.

Children can tolerate a great deal of difference in parenting styles and even tolerate different discipline approaches between their parents without it being detrimental to them. In fact, such differences can be rich and rewarding to children as they experience two different parenting approaches and learn from two different adult role models about how to behave.

However, what is very damaging and upsetting to children is witnessing their parents in constant conflict or repeatedly undermining each other. Many research studies show that parental separation has a negative outcome on the welfare of children. However, this is an average figure and a small number actually do better post-separation.

These children come from families who previously experienced high levels of negative parental conflict and where the separation leads to less conflict and much better co-operation. The central point here is that high levels of negative parental conflict is associated with poor outcome for children, whether the parents live together or not.

Thus parents who co-operate with each other and who learn to support one another (rather than undermine one another) help their children feel secure and content within the family.

Learning to support one another is especially important when you have different views about what the best way to parent is. This may mean supporting your partner's discipline strategy in front of the children even if you don't fully agree with it. For example, if you come home and discover your partner has imposed a rule which you think is too strict on the children, rather than being righteous and jumping in to criticise, it can be useful to take a step back to empathically understand what happened.

The real test of this support is how you talk about your partner to your children. For example, if your son complains about how "mean" their mum is about a certain rule, rather than joining in on your son's complaint and in the end undermining your partner's decision, it is important to support your partner and display respect towards her saying something like "I know you are upset but we have to keep your mum's rule". The key thing is to display respect towards your partner in front of the child – "maybe your mum was upset when she said it, let's all talk about it later".

It is this display of respect and support towards the other parent that is most beneficial for your children. They see that even though their parents might disagree, they don't bad mouth each other and always display respect towards the other. This not only provides your children with a role model of how to communicate, it also gives them a deep sense of security that their parents will always work together on their behalf.

Effective co-parenting is also about encouraging your partner's relationship with your children on their terms and accepting that this might be different than how you relate to the children.

For example, as a mother you might worry about the horseplay your partner gets involved in with your son (concerned about the danger and mess), but if you take a

step back you might see that this physical play is an important way of connecting for both of them, so you can decide to support this happening.

Or, as a father you can disagree about your partner's insistence that your daughter wear a certain type of clothes but you can support her point of view with your daughter – "your mum is only doing this because she cares and it is important to her".

Learning to parent together is a big challenge but crucial to your children's wellbeing and sense of security. While of course some agreement about basic rules may be necessary, the key to successful co-parenting is to support your partner rather than to necessarily have exactly the same approach.

To use the original "singing off the same hymn sheet metaphor" – sometimes it is okay to sing different songs once they are in harmony.

### **TEAM WORK: STEPS TOWARDS SUCCESSFUL CO-PARENTING**

Support your partner's relationship with the children on their terms. Both of you should have your own unique connection with each of your children. Such differences bring great richness to children's lives.

Support your partner's authority when it comes to discipline. Within reason insist your children respect your partner's decisions and rules when they are in charge even when you don't totally agree with them. Where necessary, talk through rules in advance to get some common agreement and make sure to talk through parenting conflicts together away from the children.

Model a respectful relationship with your partner. When talking to your partner in front of the children, show them how you respectfully communicate to each other. The real test of this respect is how you talk about your partner when he/she is not there especially when you or one of your children is annoyed at him/ her. Learning to display respect towards your partner, even in angry situations, provides a great role model to your children.