

Parenting Differently

... But
Together



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It is amazing how challenging it can be to share the raising of a child with another human being. Even when you are raising children with the love of your life, there will be conflict! Suddenly, all kinds of subtle differences in your families of origin, beliefs, values and personalities become apparent. And, of course, in many families it is much more complicated than that. Grandparents may be involved in significant amounts of childcare, parents may disagree passionately about parenting, relationships may break up, and new families may be forged and blended. Yet, despite the complexities, children benefit from having multiple involved caregivers. So, what can you do to navigate the maze of conflict?

Value of Carers

Firstly, it is important to recognise the value of the other adults who care for and love your child. That is, recognise the value of that person to your child. Sure, you may disagree and there may be many things that person does that you think are less than ideal. But, at the end of the day do they love your child? And does your child love them in return? An adult who loves you is a magnificent gift. You may find that some frustration on your part is a reasonable price to pay to be able to give that gift to your child.

Get back to Values

Often we can get very attached to the particular details of our plans and this can easily lead to conflict. Let go of

the details, and instead, get back to first principles. We all have underlying values that shape the way we raise our children – values like wanting to parent with compassion or wanting to be there for our children. Although we think and talk at the level of detail, we should try to talk to the other adults in our children's life on the level of values too. When you do so, you may find that your values aren't so different after all and this may make it easier to sort out exactly how you'll live your principles together. In fact, you may discover that you both want to live exactly the same value but in different ways.

Advantages of Diversity

It is possible to find the advantages in diversity of care. While it is true that consistency is important, what this actually means is often misunderstood. What children need is a world that's basically predictable. A predictable world is a safe world and predictability allows children to choose the most appropriate behaviour for the situation that they are in. Children also need to know that the adults who care for them mean what they say. However, children don't actually need every adult in their life to care for them in exactly the same way. Children are perfectly capable of learning that mum does some things this way, and daddy does it differently, and grandma's house is different again. So there's no need for everyone to stick word for word to the same script. Rules and routines can vary between caregivers, between households or even on different days of the week, as long as children can predict which rules they need to follow at any given moment. You may have discovered that your values are different in some ways

from the values of the other important adults in your child's life. At times, it may be perfectly acceptable for a particular value to be lived by one caregiver alone. Allowing for diversity of care can give more flexibility to everyone. But more than this, when children learn that the adults in their life do things differently, and those adults support each other in their differences, what an incredible message of tolerance that can be!

When Conflict Arises with Carers

When conflict arises, let go of being right. Of course, there are times when you need to share factual information or even try to convince through reasoned argument. But if that's already been done, there's still disagreement, and a decision needs to be made, then it is time to let go of being right. Instead, focus on being happy. Stop acting like philosophers working out the truth of the universe and start acting like two people who both love the same children, perhaps even who both love each other, working out how best to live together. You can bring out this side in others by carefully stepping away from any question of right or wrong and, instead, making a personal request: 'Look, I know you think it is silly, and that's fine. You don't need to agree with me. But I'm going to ask you to do this because it really matters to me. And I'd like to know what little things matter to you too.'

1. Be open, honest and clear.

When discussing an issue of conflict speak in a kind way, avoiding blaming or accusations. It is also important that you are honest and open, clearly expressing your own values, feelings and preferences. If something matters greatly to you then say so.

2. Be open to experimenting

At times, when you can't agree on the plan of action, but you can agree on what you are trying to achieve, the best course of action may be to flexibly experiment with a variety of ideas in order to discover what works best in practice with your child.

3. Be the best parent you can be

Know that you are who you are to your child and no one can change that. If you are your child's mother then you are your child's mother. You and only you can determine the kind of mother your child has. No one else can determine how you act towards your child. There are many aspects of your relationship with your child that belong to you and your child alone. Others may have an opinion on them, even criticise you at times, but they simply cannot determine who you are to your child. That decision is yours and yours alone.

Although it can be challenging to share the raising of a child with another, our children are built for multiple caregivers. The benefits that other people bring to your child's life can be worth the frustration.

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