

Parenting Wars

By Ann Douglas

It's unrealistic to expect to be totally in psych with your partner on every single parenting-related issue. After all, you'll face a smorgasbord of different parenting challenges before your children grow up and leave home: everything from potty training to teen rebellion. Here are some tips on managing the types of day-to-day disagreements that can lead to marital meltdowns.

-Identify those areas where you're in agreement. Chances are you and your partner don't go head-to-head on every conceivable parenting-related issue. And if you do, that's more of an indication of problems in the marital relationship than of differences in your parenting philosophies. It can be reassuring to discover that you and your partner are on the same wavelength when it comes to big-picture parenting issues and that your disagreements tend to centre on relatively minor points, like how to handle your ten-year-old son's reluctance to use soap in the shower!

-Accept the fact that you're each going to have your own unique parenting styles. Not only were you raised in different households: you're entirely different people. Remember, there's no such thing as a "one size fits all" parenting style.

-Come up with a parenting game plan that you both can live with. Kids are merciless when it comes to exploiting cracks in the parental armour, so it's important that you and your partner are in basic agreement about how to handle particular childrearing challenges. That means anticipating the perennial parent-child conflicts in advance and deciding how the two of you intend to handle that particular situation.

-Be clear about each parent's turf. Sometimes it makes sense to divide up the parenting responsibilities so that you each handle the same sorts of responsibilities from day to day: you may be responsible for getting your children washed and dressed in the morning, while your partner may wish to assume responsibility for overseeing the bedtime routine. Not only does this help to ensure that you both receive a bit of "down time" from the rigors of parenting: it will also help to ensure greater consistency on a day-to-day basis.

-When in doubt, call a timeout. If you're unhappy with the way your partner is handling a particular situation, wave the proverbial white flag. That way, you can discuss the situation out of earshot of your children and agree to a common solution.

-Give one another the benefit of the doubt. Recognize that every parent blows it from time to time. Don't hold your partner up to superhuman standards of parenting.

-Compliment your partner when he handles a situation particularly well. Everyone benefits from a pat on the back every now and again, including parents.

-Know when to call in the pros. Don't be afraid to seek out the advice of a neutral third party, such as a family therapist, if you're regularly butting heads on parenting issues. Sometimes a single session with a highly skilled facilitator can help you and your partner to really cut to the chase on an issue.

-Commit to an ongoing programme of parental development, and encourage your partner to come along for the ride. If you find a parenting book or video that's particular helpful to you, share it with your partner. (If he's not the type to read an entire parenting book from cover, act as his clipping service: use post-it notes to flag the parts of the book which serve up the most useful bits of wisdom.)

-Find ways to connect with your partner on a regular basis. It's hard to feel like you're on the same page when it comes to parenting if you've lost touch with one another as a couple. Schedule "date nights" on a regular basis by booking a high school or university student to come to your home on a particular evening each week or—at a minimum—every other week. Don't think of it as an expensive frill: think of it as an important investment in your well-being as a family.

-Remind yourself and your partner that this too shall pass. You won't always have young children underfoot. The childbearing years typically last for just one-third to one-quarter of a person's life. Chances are you'll remember these trying times with the fondest of memories when you look back on this time in your life in years to come. Parental amnesia is, after all, one of Father Time's greatest gifts.