

Different STROKES

YOUR SOCIALISATION HAS A HUGE IMPACT ON THE WAY YOU RAISE YOUR KIDS. BUT WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND DON'T AGREE WITH EACH OTHER'S PARENTING STYLES?

Your 16-year-old comes home with a term report full of below-average marks. Concerned, you sit them down and ask what the problem is. But when your husband sees the report, he immediately flips out and begins yelling at your son for his terrible academic performance. The two of you begin arguing over how to deal with the situation.

You and your husband clearly have different parenting styles, which regularly causes tension because you each have your own values that you refuse to compromise. How can you raise your children successfully without being at each other's throats all the time?

Many aspects of your life can influence what kind of parent you become. Your early socialisation, your own parents, culture and religion, friends, your community, as well as parenting books and websites you read all play a role. Everyone has ideals for the way they'd like to raise their kids. However, you're not the only parent of your child and you have to learn to raise him or her together successfully.

WHAT'S YOUR PARENTING STYLE?

Every parent-and-child duo has their own way of interacting with each other, which can either be positive and affirming, or volatile and counter-productive, says Port Elizabeth-based clinical psychologist Christine Slabbert. 'The way you raise your kids strongly influences the relationship dynamics in your family and how successful you'll be as a parent and a family in general,' she says. **Most parents are a combination of these four types of parenting styles:**

AUTHORITARIAN PARENTING

Do you expect your children to follow strict rules? Do you believe punishment is the best way to teach them a lesson? 'Authoritarian parents fail to explain the reasoning behind these rules. Asked to clarify them, your stock response is:

"Because I said so",' explains Christine. 'You have high demands and aren't usually responsive to your children. Your main requirement is unquestioning obedience. However, you need to understand that your kids may be dutiful, but being overly strict and rigid can lead to unhappy children who rank lower in social competence and lack self-esteem.'

How your relationship is affected

Having different sets of beliefs and values as parents is one of the top three areas of conflict among couples, says Christine. 'Another challenge is the lack of communication between parents about how they want their children to be raised. When parenting styles differ significantly, it often leads to dissonance and distance between couples, and confusion among children. When this happens, you can become increasingly argumentative not only about parenting, but also about other areas of your lives together.'

AUTHORITATIVE PARENTING

'Like authoritarian parents, you establish rules which you expect your children to obey. However, you're much more democratic and responsive to your children and are willing to listen to their questions.' When they fall short in some of your expectations, your first instinct isn't to shout and punish, but rather to be nurturing and forgiving. Your goal is to

raise kids who are assertive and socially responsible, self-regulated and co-operative, resulting in children who are happy, capable and successful.

PERMISSIVE PARENTING

Sometimes perceived as an indulgent parent, you make very few demands of your children. You rarely discipline them because you have relatively low expectations of maturity and self-control. 'Permissive parents are non-traditional and lenient, don't require mature behaviour, allow considerable self-regulation and avoid confrontation. They're generally nurturing and communicative with their children, often behaving more like a friend than a parent. This can result in poor school performance and children experiencing problems with authority,' says Christine.

Kids are impacted too

When parents give children contradictory messages, the result is inconsistency and confusion regarding what they are and aren't permitted to do. 'Children wonder whose side to take and what the real rules are. They also learn that they can play their parents off against each other and manipulate situations for their own benefit, which can foster similarly manipulative or dishonest qualities in them as adults. In extreme cases, they may become anxious or depressed as a result of their long-term internal conflict,' says Christine.

UNINVOLVED PARENTING

Uninvolved parents have very few demands, low responsiveness and minimal communication with their kids. While you fulfil your child's basic needs, you're generally detached from their life. 'In extreme cases, these parents may even reject or neglect the needs of their children. Uninvolved parenting styles rank lowest across all life domains. These children tend to lack self-control, have low self-esteem and be less competent than their peers,' explains Christine.

HOW TO MAKE IT WORK

Although reaching a compromise can be difficult, it's possible for you and your husband to agree – first and foremost – on the non-negotiable rules: for example, honesty, respect, curfews, homework, etc. Secondary rules can be discussed and even be used to complement one another. Christine offers these tips:

1 IDENTIFY YOUR OWN PARENTING STYLE: Having a better understanding of your own approach provides insight into your behaviour and the potential consequences thereof. As a couple, you can then discuss your respective values and identify situations in which each of your approaches may be most beneficial to your children.

2 DIVIDE AND CONQUER: Identify 'hot topics' that lead to conflict and decide whose methods would be best suited to manage them. For example, your husband may be the better disciplinarian, or you may be better at getting kids to do their homework. If you agree to let one another take the lead in certain situations and present a united front, it will give each of you an opportunity to engage in parenting practices based on your individual strengths.

3 DISCUSS DIFFERENCES AND MEET EACH OTHER HALFWAY: Prioritise family values and areas of discipline so that there isn't constant conflict over minor issues. For example, if one of you tends to be more lenient than the other about TV time, having a discussion about it can help you reach an acceptable compromise.

4 PRESENT A UNITED FRONT: Never argue in front of your children and never allow them to fob you off with 'But Mom/Dad said it was okay'. Wait until you're alone to discuss your disagreements, so that your kids receive a consistent message from both of you. Never make your spouse look bad in front of your children, even if you're upset with them.

5 AGREE ON SUITABLE CONSEQUENCES FOR BAD BEHAVIOUR: If children have a clear idea of what's expected of them and what will happen if they break the boundaries, they'll be better behaved – and feel a lot more secure.

6 BE FLEXIBLE: If you have more than one child, their individual needs and personalities may require different approaches. Children's needs and responses to different parenting styles may also change as they grow older. Agree with your spouse on how you'll modify expectations for each of them.

What about stepparenting?

Raising kids becomes even trickier if they aren't your own. 'The early stages of blending two different families can be particularly challenging. It takes about two years for children to settle into blended family life. Not only are new couples getting to know each other and developing their own relationship, but there are relationships with biological kids and stepchildren to nurture too,' says Christine. Here are guidelines for easing the transition:

- 1** Focus on developing individual relationships first. Take things slowly and get to know your stepchildren as individuals before trying to create 'one big, happy family'.
- 2** Have similar rules for all the children in your household and don't change any existing ones.
- 3** Make changes gradually and try to involve the children in the creation of new family rules.
- 4** Support children and allow space for difficult emotions while they're transitioning from one home to another.
- 5** Find activities that unite, rather than alienate stepparents and stepchildren.
- 6** Always speak of the children's other parents with respect. Keep negative comments and tension away from them.
- 7** Have positive rules: for example, greeting each other civilly every morning. Praise and reward these behaviours.

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Blended.