

## Positive Parenting

# Supporting Your Partner

*Parenting is easier and more rewarding when parents work together, communicate well and support each other's efforts. All parents occasionally disagree about how to deal with their children's behaviour, but problems can occur when parents argue often in front of their children, especially if the issue is not resolved. Children do best in stable, predictable, caring environments where conflict is low, parents communicate well and disagreements are resolved. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you work together as a parenting team and minimise the impact of any conflict on your child's development.*

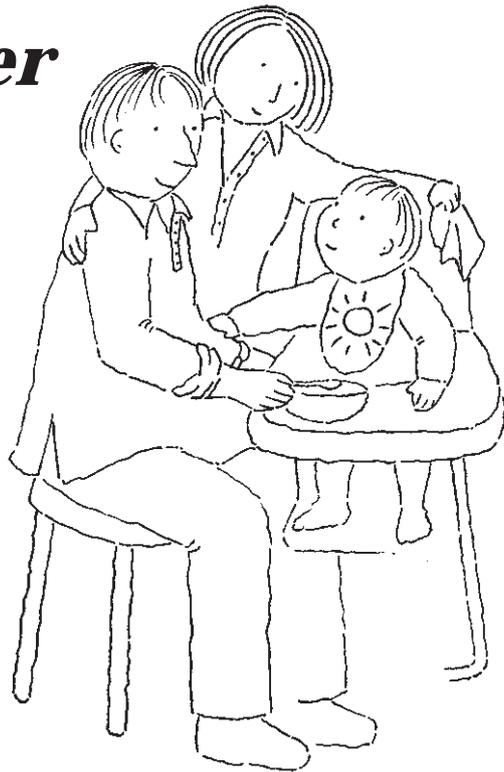
## What Do Parents Disagree About?

Parents can disagree about parenting issues, child care responsibilities and the sharing of household tasks. Here are some common issues or disagreements:

- What household rules to have.
- Type of discipline to use and who should discipline the children.
- Fighting in front of the children.
- Sharing child care and household workloads.
- One parent being 'soft' and the other being 'tough' with the children.
- What each parent sees as naughty behaviour.
- Parents being inconsistent or undermining each other—not backing each other up.
- Children preventing parents from being alone.

## Why Do Couples Have Conflict over Parenting?

Conflict between partners over parenting issues is common. Working as a team is not easy, as each parent has their own beliefs, values, expectations and skills. Each parent's approach is influenced by their childhood memories of their own parents, their life experiences, the opinions of their relatives and friends, and what they read and see in the media. It is understandable that parents have different ideas about how children should be raised and how the family should operate.



The day-to-day demands of raising children can also place a strain on any relationship, particularly when children are young or their behaviour is difficult to manage. When a couple's relationship is strained, it is even harder to work together as a parenting team.

## How To Look After Your Relationship

### *Focus on Your Own Behaviour*

It is easy to fall into the trap of blaming or criticising your partner, but blame and criticism are not helpful. It is better to focus on your own behaviour and take responsibility for your own actions. Look at how your behaviour may be contributing to any parenting difficulties or relationship problems. Think about what you can do to improve your own parenting strategies and how you can work together with your partner to reduce conflict.

### *Take Care of Your Relationship*

When couples are very busy there is a danger of neglecting or forgetting their relationship. Take care of your relationship by giving the caring words and actions that came easily early on in your relationship. Let your partner know that you appreciate their efforts both in the relationship and in parenting.

Each day, try to do something for or with your partner to show affection, such as saying *'I love you'*, giving hugs, or bringing them a cup of tea in bed. Think of things that show respect, such as listening to them and saying thank you. Take time to do things you like to do together as a couple, such as working on a project together or going out on a date. Share your ideas and experiences by talking with your partner and asking about their day. You can also support them by offering to help if they are busy.

## **How To Work as a Team**

### ***Share Your Parenting Roles***

Talk about which of you is responsible for different household chores and parenting tasks and when you will do them. To reach agreement over parenting issues, discuss your ideas on issues such as family rules and how to manage misbehaviour. Be clear that you are both responsible for discipline—problem behaviour should be dealt with straight away, no matter which parent is there. Share your child's care and make important decisions together. You may need to review this from time to time to make sure that workloads are shared.

### ***Talk Openly with Your Partner***

To work as a team, you and your partner will need to talk and share ideas. This means saying clearly and calmly how you feel and what you think. It also means listening to your partner's point of view and checking that you have understood them. It is easy to fall into bad communication habits, such as raising your voice, interrupting, being sarcastic, not listening, and talking over the top of each other. Try to work on your own listening and speaking habits to make sure you speak calmly and make your point clearly, and show that you are interested and listening to what your partner has to say.

### ***Give Helpful Suggestions***

Part of working together as a couple involves talking about what you are doing and being open to helpful feedback from your partner. For example, if you have just dealt with a difficult situation, you can learn to deal with that situation better next time if you talk about it and get ideas from your partner. When you give feedback, start with what you liked and then give your suggestion—*'I like the way you told the children to stop fighting and keep their hands to themselves. They did keep fighting though, so maybe we could aim to separate them next time if they don't stop fighting. What do you think?'* Helpful feedback is

not criticism, it helps you to change your behaviour for the better. Remember, you are both learning and need help and support to keep changing to meet the demands of your growing family.

### ***Talk with Each Other Every Day About Your Child***

Put aside a little time each day to show interest in your partner's day. If you have been with your child through the day, talk about pleasant, fun things that happened through the day as well as any problems. If problems arose, avoid dumping on your partner. Simply choose one problem situation. Talk about what happened and how you dealt with it. If you have been away from the family, take the time to listen and show your partner you are interested in what they are saying. Whenever possible, praise and encourage your partner's efforts. Avoid criticising or judging your partner as this can make them feel less motivated.

### ***Support Each Other When Problem Behaviour Occurs***

It is important that parents are consistent in the ways they respond to their children's behaviour. Work together, and do it so that your child sees you are working together. If your partner is managing a problem behaviour, you can support and help them to follow through with discipline. For example, you could help with your other children while your partner carries out a discipline strategy with one child. Do not interfere or come to the rescue by being the tough parent or taking over the discipline. Back your partner up by not giving contradictory instructions to your child.

Do not comment on your partner's handling of the situation until after the incident is over and you are calm. If you think your partner handled the situation well, praise and congratulate them. If you were not happy with the way the situation was handled or you have ideas on how to handle the situation next time, plan a time to sit down and talk about what happened.

## ***Plan To Discuss Problems When Calm***

It is best to avoid discussing problems immediately after they have occurred or when you have just arrived home, particularly if you have had a bad day.

If you are feeling stressed or upset, you are unlikely to want advice from someone else. Plan a time for talking about problems when you are both likely to be calm and the children will not interrupt. It may be helpful to wait until the children have gone to bed.

## **How To Solve Problems**

### ***Avoid Conflict in Front of Your Child***

Do not argue or fight in front of your child as children learn a lot through watching others. Children who see their parents arguing or fighting can learn inappropriate ways of dealing with problems. These children may yell and shout or become aggressive when faced with a problem. Children who grow up with a lot of tension and conflict in their home can develop behaviour problems and problems getting on with others. They may become aggressive, disruptive, withdrawn or anxious.

### ***Work Together To Solve Problems***

It is good to let your child see how you solve problems calmly. Show them how a problem can be broken down into smaller parts that can be worked out one at a time. When discussing problems in front of your child, avoid issues that cannot be easily solved and issues that involve disagreements over parenting or discipline. Discuss disagreements over parenting or discipline when your child is not present.

### ***Follow the Problem Solving Steps***

It can take time and practice to learn to discuss problems calmly and come up with solutions that suit everyone. Here are some steps you can follow:

- State the problem clearly, so you are sure you are both talking about the same thing.
- Come up with some possible solutions—brainstorm. This involves coming up with as many ideas as you can, without judging them.
- When you have a list of suggestions, look at the good and bad points of each one and choose the best solution. Your solution may involve a number of different ideas.
- Try out the solution.
- Review how the solution worked and make any necessary changes.

## **When To Seek Help**

If either you or your partner is unhappy in your relationship, or there is conflict in your relationship and you argue or fight in front of your children often, seek professional advice.

Sometimes one partner can be unhappy in a relationship without the other partner knowing. If you are unhappy, you need to talk to your partner about how you feel. This can be difficult. Plan a time to talk to your partner when you are both calm and unlikely to be disturbed by your children. It is best to avoid blaming or dumping on your partner. Try to speak calmly and clearly and express your feelings and opinions. You might say something like: *'I think we need to talk about what's happening to our relationship. For the past few weeks, I've been feeling that our relationship isn't going very well and I'm just not happy at the moment. I'd like to share with you my concerns about what I see are some of the problems. Can we talk about this issue now?'*

Once the issue has been brought up, you will need to work together on solving the problem. Follow the problem solving steps described above. After your problem solving discussion, you may decide that you would like to seek professional advice.

### **Key Steps**

- Focus on your own behaviour and what you can do to help your relationship.
- Give the caring words and actions that came easily early in your relationship.
- Work as a team by sharing your roles as parents.
- Talk to each other every day about the children and your family life.
- Praise and encourage each other when things go well.
- Support your partner when they are dealing with misbehaviour.
- Plan to discuss problems when you are both likely to be calm and your children will not interrupt.
- Follow the problem solving steps.
- Seek professional advice if you fight in front of the children a lot or you are not happy in your relationship.

***If you have any questions or have tried these suggestions and are concerned about your relationship, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.***



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