

Disagreements About Discipline

DEAN MERRILL

Did your parents believe in spanking?
When your father became dead serious, did his voice get louder or softer?
What about your mother?

Did you get paid for doing certain chores, or were they just expected as part of family obligation?

Did your parents set a minimum age

for dating, or did they wait to see how mature you were?

When you got in trouble, how long did it take for the "storm to blow over"? A day? A week? Five minutes?

The answers to these and a hundred other questions have shaped your approach to child discipline far more than you realize. By and large, you raise kids the way you were raised. So do we all. We may have consciously decided *not* to follow our parents' lead in one area or another, but such changes are the exception rather than the rule. Our general inclination is to repeat history. After all, *we* turned out pretty good, didn't we?

The trouble is this: your husband or wife didn't grow up in the same home you did. He or she brings to this marriage a different set of assumptions about the best way to raise kids. Who's right?

This question is more than just academic, because good parenting absolutely demands a united front. Kids are quick to notice discrepancies between Mom's way and Dad's way, Mom's rule and Dad's rule—and exploit them to the hilt. They find the cracks and borderlines, playing one parent against the other to their personal advantage. No wonder God designed marriage as a union of minds and hearts; He knew parenting would prove to be the acid test.

I once interviewed a father and mother who, try as they might, could not seem to come up with a common strategy for handling their headstrong son. He began smoking in junior high and then got into drugs; the week after he turned 16, he was picked up by the police. The worse his behavior became, the more the parents seemed to polarize: Mom wanting to protect her son, support him if at all possible, try to talk him into straightening up; Dad deciding it was time to wash his hands of the mess and let the School of Hard Knocks bear down on the boy.

They never did resolve their disagreement. As a result, the son kept getting mixed signals. His rebellion raged on until, at age 19, only a near-fatal construction accident brought him to his senses and back to the Lord.

Meanwhile, something worse had happened: the father found someone to agree with his disciplinary philosophy, a younger woman at work who said, "You're right—he's not a kid anymore. He's almost a grown man. Consequences have to take their toll." From this sliver grew a plank that split the marriage, spreading pain in all directions and also costing the father his career.

I came away from those interviews deeply saddened—and impressed as

never before with the importance of singlemindedness in discipline. There cannot be two policies under the same roof; Mom and Dad must speak with one mind. The children must know that when they've heard from one parent, they've heard from the other as well, and it won't do any good to ask again—they'll just get the same answer.

How do we come to consensus? Here are some steps:

1. *Set a clear goal of the kind of son or daughter you'd like your child to be at age 18.* What will the "finished product" look like? Make a list of your most desired qualities: initiative, kindness, honesty, thoroughness, punctuality, responsiveness to God, etc.

2. *Study how other successful Christian parents have done it.* Read the accounts of people all the way from Susannah Wesley to those in modern times, noticing what made their parenting efforts turn out as they did.

3. *Pray aloud together about your disciplinary tactics.* God is certainly as interested as the two of you are in raising a well-adjusted child. "If any of you

lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). Sometimes, after days of fruitless, solitary mind wracking, a solution pops up during these prayer times.

4. *Make the necessary time to confer privately.* This is often late at night, later than you'd wish. But make the time anyway. Work out your plan for handling sloppy rooms, backtalk, sibling squabbles, and all the rest. Be prepared!

5. *Refuse to be trapped by a child.* Don't accept, "But Mom said . . ." if it doesn't sound like something Mom would say. Not every question has to be answered right now. There's no sin in saying, "I'll get back to you about that," and then consulting with your spouse before issuing a response.

Kids deserve a steady hand on the controls of their lives. Otherwise, how will they become good parents themselves in 20 years?