

Partnering Well in Parenting

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It is with hope and joy that we have welcomed our children into our lives as parents. We've looked forward to loving them, and to loving each other in the project of nurturing them. It's often the biggest commitment we make as partners, and it is almost guaranteed to become, at least at times, a significant source of stress and strain.

There are lots of causes for the stress that grows between parenting partners. Oddly enough, we receive no preparation or support for handling these stresses. Although they are predictable, and perhaps even inevitable, we receive little warning and even less help in handling them.

Some of the sources of strain in almost every parenting partnership are these:

- There's no safety net for the work of raising children, so most parents wrestle with financial worries. This creates fear that affects their ability to enjoy each other, their children and their parenting.
- There's so little support for the work of parenting. Both parents find that the work weighs heavily on their time, their emotional resources, and finally, their sense of choice and enjoyment in life. This is a little-understood but grave defect in our organization of

society. The work of parenting deserves to be the focus of down-to-earth, easily available help that is tailored to the needs of parents and their children.

The lack of support leaves most parents feeling guilty for their short-tempered moments, confused about what their children really need, isolated and unable to talk frankly about the real difficulties they face, and exhausted--so tired that it's hard to solve problems or care well for themselves.

- Our society sets out rigid roles for the parent partners to play. Almost every role in relation to caring for children is traditionally tied to either the father or the mother. Each parent in a pair wishes for more choice, but feels hemmed in by the expectations to be the provider or the at-home carer, to be the diaper changer or the discipline deliverer.
- Under the added work of nurturing children, the lack of communication tools exaggerates the difficulties in the partnership that existed before the child or children arrived. We are taught many practical and impractical things in school, but generally, communication and relationship-building, crucial skills for parents, are not included.
- In each adult, a minefield of feelings about children is activated by the doings of our offspring. We don't often take responsibility for those feelings. They feel like they are inevitable. "Of course I get angry when my toddler pulls the dog's tail!" When given a chance to talk to a listener about the feelings they have, many parents find that they are far better able to act the way they choose to act, rather than become reactive as their children play, explore, and try out new and sometimes unworkable behaviors.
- Our children have their irrational moments, and they try to offload emotional stress. So they set up situations that let them laugh long and hard, or cry long and hard. Children's deeply felt emotions, which are cleansing and healing for them, trigger powerful unacknowledged feelings in adults. So we parents tend to feel passionately negative about our children's efforts to melt tension with crying, tantrums, and laughter. These negative feelings transfer onto the child himself, or onto the work of parenting, and drive us away from the people we love so dearly.
- When we parents feel badly about the parenting job we are doing, we tend to find fault with our partners, rather than facing how badly we feel about ourselves, or how much help we need to parent well. This dynamic—finding fault with the person closest to you, or with the person in a situation similar to yours—operates to ignite feelings of superiority or inferiority between parents of all kinds, and it serves to isolate parents from each other's good thinking and help.

Steps that help keep the partnership working

Because of the paltry support for the work of parenting, none of the steps that follow is likely to be easy to take. However, these activities can help parents improve their partnership.

- Share appreciations openly and regularly, perhaps in a nightly "success and appreciation check-in." Each parent takes several minutes to describe something he's proud of about how he did that day, and something he appreciates about his partner. No interruptions, no corrections, no disagreement allowed. This appreciation and success check-in can be extended to the children in the family, if they are able to talk. Some families make this a tradition at dinnertime.



- Schedule time together without the children on a regular basis. Parenting partners need time to enjoy one another and to communicate without the pressure of the children's presence, and without the end-of-the-day exhaustion. It may be possible to set up a childcare trade with another couple who need this kind of time too, so that the cost of getting away for an few hours isn't prohibitive.
- Set a policy of offering 10 appreciations for every course correction you offer. Without appreciation for our efforts, corrections that are meant to help will land in the mental trash heap.
- Save the corrections you offer for an emotionally neutral time. Then, give your partner a choice in whether to hear the idea you have. For instance, say, "I have a thought about you and Brian, if you'd like to hear it." This is hard to do! But when we feel urgent about giving advice, we usually have a tone of irritation, worry, or discouragement that will sabotage our message. On important matters, it can make a big difference if you have someone, not your partner, listen to your concerns and your sense of urgency for 10 or 15 minutes, to take some of the heat off the subject before you approach your partner.

- When you disagree about how to handle your child, set up a time to talk it over. If the disagreement is substantial, it can help to set up a time when one parent will fully observe the other, without interruption or comment, as the disputed interaction happens. The observer notices what happens to start it, exactly what the parent does, how the child responds, and what the results are afterward in the child's behavior. The observer also stays alert to the feelings he or she has as the interaction proceeds.

Later, each parent takes time to say what they noticed about the interaction, in detail, including the feelings of the observer. (It's usually more helpful to let the active parent talk first about what he or she is trying to do, and to ask how well it worked, rather than to try to figure out who is "right" and who is "wrong.") Then, later, the parent who was active becomes the observer, and another debriefing without criticism takes place. After that, the questions about what works best with the child should be clearer, and friends, rabbis or pastors, child care professionals, or other committed people can be consulted, with both parents present and looking for a way to handle the differences.

Often, the real issue is not so much parenting style as it is the amount of stress a parent is under. When we're under stress, our responses to our children don't fit the situation. In this case, both parents can think together about how to reduce or relieve the stress, rather than argue about what the ideal thing to do would be. Under stress, we can't be our loving, playful, generous selves with our children or with anyone else.

- Notice when you are feeling especially upset about your partner. In general, unless physical attack is the issue, these times of upset are not good times to make categorical decisions. Find a listener, encourage your partner to do the same, and tackle all the feelings that have wrapped so tightly around your relationship and your parenting. Every parent needs help from the outside, and, at some point, every set of parenting partners finds themselves in emotionally difficult times. These times can lead to real breakthroughs in understanding each other and to changes in unworkable expectations. Such breakthroughs are often the result of each person taking responsibility for his or her worst feelings, and not blaming those feelings on the other. In general, our worst feelings spring from issues in our early lives. They interfere in our present relationships until we rob them of their power by finding someone to listen to our story, and care while we laugh, or cry, or rage the tension away.
- Accept the necessity of a good fight (verbal, of course) now and then. Fight fair, and find ways to end the fight when the messages get repetitive. The pressure of parenting and the isolation we feel as we work harder than we've ever worked makes tension between partners inevitable. Often, a good argument, in which each person fights to understand and be understood by the other (not to win), can actually create a sense of relief and closeness. Loud arguments and the emotional tension behind them are frightening to young children, so finding a place and a time to fight, out of earshot of the rest of the family, is important.

A few of the rules of a fair fight are:

- Don't attack the character of your partner. Say how particular behaviors make you feel. Instead of "I can't believe how selfish you are!" your fight is fair when you say, "When you talk with Ginnie on the phone and I have to put the children to bed myself, I feel like you don't care about me or them!"
- Don't make categorical statements. Rather than "You never remember to pick up the clothes at the cleaners! I told you I needed them for tomorrow!" try, "It makes me feel like I don't count when you forget the errands I ask you to do! Now I feel like I won't look my best for the presentation at work tomorrow."
- Welcome crying and tantrums. This may seem odd, but the expression of feelings gives a person a chance to unload tension. After a good cry or a good tantrum, it's often possible to feel heard, and to feel close. There's no need to argue your point while your partner is crying. Try to resist the urge to come up with an immediate solution. Often, the listening you do while your partner cries is the solution.
- When the same complaints have come around for a third time, end the fight. A good way to end it is for one person to say, "Let's do something else, now, and check in about it later!" Then, shift your attention to something active, like making the beds or taking a walk around the block. It can also help to do something that includes physical touch, like holding hands or snuggling up back to back in bed. Physical touch, even when you're upset, tends to melt some tension, and it also sometimes helps the tears that release tension to flow at last.

One dependable practice that makes relationships glide more easily over time is for parents to each find someone to listen to them on a regular basis. This is not yet a customary part of most parents' lives. But, like brushing our teeth daily, which wasn't common until perhaps the turn of this century, having a steady, once-a-week listener is a powerful promoter of health and good functioning. It's a practice that lifts the frustrations and loneliness that come with the hard work of parenting. And, if you can exchange listening with another parent, it's free.