

Strengthening Your Parenting Team

Dr. Kahn began by listing five typical scenarios where two parents may respond differently and gave examples of how the parents might respond:

1. Child is anxious at bedtime (age 4-6).
 - One parent wants to comfort the child.
 - The other parent sees this as a lack of inner strength on the child's part and feels the child should toughen up.
2. Child is not invited to a birthday party (age 7-9).
 - One parent is hurt that the child wasn't invited.
 - The other parent is upset with the other parents for not inviting their child.
3. Child is being oppositional with parents (age 10-12).
 - One parent thinks the child has a psychological disorder.
 - The other parent thinks it's "just the age."
4. Child is wasting time, the child's grades are dropping, and the child is generally disorganized (age 13-15)
 - One parent worries about how the child will ever go to college or succeed in life.
 - The other parent is angry about the child's lack of caring.
5. Child is having rule-following problems and coming home after curfew (age 16-18)
 - One parent is extraordinarily worried until the child gets home, at which point the parent is simply relieved and happy to see the child.
 - The other parent is angry at the child's disrespect.

Dr. Kahn pointed out that disagreements between parents seem to be about *what to do*. He points out that in each of the scenarios the same events are seen differently by the two parents. Teamwork is about the *viewing* of the event.

Dr. Kahn describes *mistakes* as things our children do that we'd rather they didn't and *disappointments* as things the world does to our children that we wish it wouldn't. What's important in dealing with mistakes and disappointments as a parenting team is determining if we *see* the moments as the same teaching opportunity. He claimed that how we view our children at any given moment is more about us (the parents) than them (the children). Therefore, when working with our parenting partner, the most important question we can ask is: "Tell me how you see this."

Everyone has blind spots that prevent them from seeing teaching opportunities. Our children learn to judge how big of a deal things are from us. We tend to think that our partners see moments the way we do. If you can change the way you see the moment, it can change the way you feel about it.

Dr. Kahn recommends that we *always* support our partners in front of the kids and discuss disagreements and parenting strategies later.

Dr. Kahn referred to a handout in which there were two lists of statements about parenting. The lists were identical, except that they were numbered in reverse order from each other. He asked how differently two people would parent if they had their lists ordered in those ways.

He went on to explain that this is why working as a parenting team can be so challenging. When we fell in love with our partners, we most likely didn't prioritize a list of parenting statements and compare notes. In fact, we probably never had a conversation about parenting styles. In addition, couples come from different families of origin, different levels of experience with children, different birth order, different personalities, and probably a million other reasons.

Power imbalance is another factor that impacts working as a team. Dr. Kahn says there are balance of power issues between couples that have nothing to do with the children. It's important to keep this in mind because disagreements can be about this rather than the parenting moment being addressed.

Gender also impacts the parenting team. Dr. Kahn talked about how this is especially important during adolescent years when moms need to keep their conversations with boys short and dads need to have long, detailed conversations with daughters.

Parents tend to interpret moments as being urgent far more often than they actually are. Dr. Kahn's response is that a parenting moment is not urgent unless it involves traffic, stoves, or bathtubs. He urges parents to spend more time in their own heads and less time in our children's heads.

Dr. Kahn discussed short-term versus long-term focus. He explained that parents with short-term focus cannot see the "blessing" of their child getting a C in 4th grade, and they often want to rescue the child. Parents with long-term focus can see that the problem will take 6, 12, or maybe even 18 months to correct. They will allow the child to do worse for a while and give them the chance to correct the problem without rescuing them.

Above all else, parents must protect their connection with their children. Nothing is more important than having your children continuing to come to you with their problems and mistakes. Dr. Kahn recommends that you always talk to your children like you would to your neighbors and friends, specifically regarding your tone.

Dr. Kahn explained that our children need uncomfortable times so they can learn how to handle them. Those times offer us the chance to teach our children resilience. If we want to prevent them from discomfort, it's a sign that we are enmeshed rather than connected.

Whatever is in front of us, as parents we're supposed to make it better with our presence, not worse. We do our best parenting when we accept what is in front of us for what it is. We need to teach our children that their worth is not based on their achievements. Ultimately, it is up to us to set the emotional tone for the family.