

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Last week we went camping with several other families. The older kids were jumping from a cliff into the lake. I estimate the jump to be about that of a two story building. My eight-year old son, T.J., wanted to do it too. But, I felt that he was too young and his swimming skills not sufficient for this activity. Instead I offered to take him out in the rowboat or do something else that he would enjoy. Charlie, my husband, told me (in front of T.J. and everyone else) that I was “babying” our son and that he could do it if he wanted to. Of course, T.J. heard this permission from his Dad and climbed up the cliff and dove off. To Charlie’s credit, he did get into the water to make sure that T.J. was safe after he jumped off, but I was furious. I felt put down in front of our friends and undermined in front of our son. I told Charlie this (privately) but he says I am making too big a deal out of nothing. He thinks you will agree with him that I should have let T.J. try this with the older kids so that he would feel like one of the crowd. Do you agree?

-- Ellen

Dear Ellen,

Sorry Charlie, but I don’t agree. I can’t say whether or not this particular activity was too risky for an eight-year old, though a leap from a two-story building into a lake sounds like pushing the envelope for a new swimmer. I’m a big believer in building up skills before taking unnecessary risks. It’s best to master the bunny slope before you head down the Olympic slalom course. However, I digress. The question is not whether it was safe for T.J. to take on this challenge, but rather, how was the process by which he was granted permission to do so? And that -- I think we can all agree -- was seriously flawed.

Charlie was wrong to challenge your authority with your son. The fact that he did this in front of T.J. and others was uncalled for, and I don’t blame you for being angry. Without saying so in words, Charlie communicated to T.J. that he is the ultimate decision-maker, and that your opinion is less important. This is a terrible teaching for T.J., and lays the groundwork for future manipulation of you both by getting Mom and Dad in conflict, and then going with the opinion he likes best.

Parents must show a “united front” in front of children, even if they disagree about an issue. This was an opportunity for a conversation between you and your husband, wherein each of you could present your point of view. Your husband might have said to you, “I think you’re babying him, honey. He won’t be in danger, and I’ll get in the water to make sure he is safe.” And, though you might have wanted to say, “Are you trying to kill our kid?!” you could have, as I think you did, explain to your husband your concerns. This conversation could have been conducted privately, telling T.J. , “We disagree about whether or not this is something that you’re old enough to do, T.J. We both want you to have fun, but we also both want you to be safe. We’re going to talk about it.”

It’s not necessary for parents to share the exact same parenting style, agree on every decision, or be in sync one-hundred percent of the time. What is necessary is that

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8/25/04

kids see a process of communicating about differences with mutual respect, and a willingness to negotiate and compromise. In other words, their parents both have authority to make decisions about them. Remember the old “United we stand, divided we fall” axiom? It’s true, and an additional benefit for T.J. is that he will learn that people can respectfully disagree, and still work things out.

I think Charlie owes you an apology, and needs to explain to T.J. that now, and in the future, both his parent’s opinions are to be respected.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.