

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My wife and I can never agree about how to raise our three teenage children. I think she is overprotective and lets them get away with everything. She says I'm too strict, but I'm afraid that they will grow up to be irresponsible, spoiled adults. We have arguments about this weekly and I'm tired of saying the same things over and over.

-- Frustrated Father

Dear Frustrated Father,

Deciding how to raise the children is one of three major areas of conflict that haunt most marriages (the other two being sex and money). What is clear to me is that you are both coming from different places about discipline, and have not created a "united front," where rules are clearly defined, and certain behaviors are met with specific rewards or punishments.

It's impossible to tell from your letter which of you has the best take on healthy parenting. For example, is your wife really compassionate and forgiving, or is she just a total pushover, letting your teenagers get away with murder? Do your rules represent healthy boundaries, and model self-responsibility and independence? Or are you a dictatorial, perfectionist bully, reminiscent of "The Great Santini" or Vlad the Impaler?

I'll assume that both of you are psychologically healthy and that your philosophies and approaches are within the normal range of good parenting behavior. I will also assume that each of you wants to teach values, make certain your kids are safe, and help them recognize that they bear responsibility for their actions, while at the same time giving them room to grow and express their normal teenage behaviors. (While even healthy teenagers have an almost uncanny ability to make most parents want to pull their hair out -- Sorry, my dear teenager readers, but it's the truth -- it is a developmental reality).

That being said -- that your situation is merely a clash of parenting styles -- it is most important that you and your wife come to some decision about what is acceptable behavior, and what is not. You will both have to compromise. You will both have to move toward the center, in order to create an environment that is loving, responsible, and consistently enforced. Rules are most effective when they are age-appropriate, and consistent as well as compassionate. As teenagers, your kids might benefit from some consultation, both in terms of boundaries and consequences. That is not to say that they should determine either, but it is important at their age for them to know that you value their opinions and input. It is also important that they know the final decisions come from both their parents, that you and your wife make the decisions together, and will back each other up. Without consistency, your kids will learn to play the two of you like fiddles -- pitting you against each other. This is not good for your marriage, or your kids.

Here are some issues that should be part of the discussion between you and your wife:

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- What are the boundaries for your kids? What are their curfews? What do you expect of them in the way of grades, participating in family events, chores? Come up with a list that is so crystal clear that you can write it down. Then, do that. Write it down and share it with your teens.
- What are the consequences for the violation of these rules? Give plenty of rewards for a job well done, but decide on appropriate punishment for the failure to live up to your expectations.
- There are bound to be slip-ups where your teenagers don't live up to the rules. They are already aware that you both take different approaches as parents and that's fine. By showing them that you can agree to disagree, but still compromise and work together, you are teaching them important lessons about how healthy relationships operate. But when you have to set limits or mete out punishment (and I guarantee you that this will happen), don't correct each other or argue in front of your children. Agree to talk later where you can each honestly express your feelings and opinions. Remember, together you both make up the parental unit. This is critical to a healthy family dynamic.

It sounds to me like both you and your wife are to be commended for your care and concern for your children. It is a daunting responsibility to raise three children, but make sure that you also pay attention to the relationship between the two of you. Don't forget that your marriage started out as friends and lovers. Give ample attention to this relationship, as well. Take time for dinner out together, quiet walks, or other activities that keep you in touch with this aspect of your relationship. Good luck!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) www.fullpotentialliving.com