

Letting Go of Control

Are you and your spouse clashing over parenting duties? Find out how to co-parent in peace!

By Linda DiProperzio

C. Lee Reed is a working mom who was always responsible for all aspects of child care -- until her husband was laid off as a result of the struggling economy. "It sounded so easy to have Daddy handle 95 percent of the daily care taking now that he had free time," says Reed, from Tampa, FL. "Problem is, I had my way of doing things, while he just did them -- no particular way needed -- simply to get it accomplished. After fighting about the frequency of nap time, the tightness of the diaper band, how much water the baby should drink, when to put on her socks, et cetera, we realized that the stress of our bickering and my worrying about what went on while I was at work was hampering the family's dynamic."

This scenario is acted out in many households, with one parent (typically the mom) playing a more active role in daily parenting responsibilities. Then, when her spouse steps in to help, a power struggle can sometimes ensue. A study from Ohio State University found that when it comes to co-parenting young children, the less a father is involved in caregiving duties, the stronger the relationship is between the two parents. The study explains that fathers do better when they're playing with their child, but that problems arise between parents when dads take part in child-care activities, like preparing meals and giving a bath.



"At one time or another, even the most compatible caregivers find themselves struggling over whose technique or method is better," says Anastasia Gavalas, M.S., a parenting [education](#) consultant and mother of five (www.anastasiagavalas.wordpress.com). "The most important thing to remember is that the best way to parent is in a way that is authentic and right for each individual person."

So, how do you co-parent together peacefully? Here are some expert tips.

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Expert Tips

Acknowledge your differences. It makes sense that you and your spouse will have contrasting [parenting styles](#) -- after all, you're two distinct people with your own unique personalities, attributes, and way of thinking. "Children actually benefit from having the two styles, as those styles usually tend to complement each other," says Emma K. Vigluccia, a marriage and family therapist in New York City. "And each parent gets to connect and be there for the child differently." Tina Feigal, M.S.Ed., owner of Center for the Challenging Child, LLC (www.parentingmojo.com), agrees: "It's good that kids have two parents with two different styles -- it teaches them flexibility at an early age. Besides, there is no one right way to parent a child."

Compromise on the big stuff. Parents need to agree when it comes to important issues, such as discipline, health, and safety. "Let's say Mom uses time-outs when the kids' behaviors aren't appropriate, but Dad is amused by his kids' antics and wants to 'let kids be kids.' Inconsistent parenting is a challenge in most families," says Candi Wingate, president of Nannies4Hire (www.nannies4hire.com). "Initially, kids can find this confusing, and then they will try to push the envelope with both parents." The best tactic is for parents to sit down when the kids aren't around and discuss how to handle these hot-button issues. Then make sure you're both consistent with these rules regardless of who is in charge.

Don't sweat the small stuff. Does it really matter if your husband serves one veggie with dinner instead of two? Or that he lets your little one skip bath time every now and then so they can play a little longer before bed? With smaller issues, you really need to pick your battles, says Melanie A. Greenberg, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in Marin County, CA (www.melanieagreenbergphd.com).

Respect your spouse's role. Although you might be the primary caregiver, your spouse is still your child's parent. His opinions count and need to be respected. "The most important thing for parents to remember is that they are a team. No one side has more power than the other, regardless of the difference in time or effort that either side puts in," says Michael Harmann, the founder of Adolescent Behavioral Consulting (www.adolescentbehavioralconsulting.com).

Give him some space. One of the best ways for a primary-caregiving parent to let go and relinquish power and control is to have something else on her agenda, says John Duffy, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist and author of *The Available Parent* (www.drjohnduffy.com). "One mom I worked with does yoga in the evenings, leaving her husband to take care of

the children a couple of nights a week. Another mom has joined the PTA to get out of the house, make a contribution, and relinquish that control a bit. One primary-caregiving Dad practiced with his band while he happily handed control of his brood of four over to his breadwinning wife."

Play to your strengths. Dad is great at making baths a breeze, while Mom is a master at meal time. If finding a compromise on certain areas is hard, try splitting some parenting duties so that each of you is in charge of specific activities.

Be thankful. Not everyone is lucky enough to have a spouse who wants to help out, so enjoy it! "The time to replenish or get things done will make you a more relaxed parent," says Dr. Greenberg. Instead of looking over your honey's shoulder, use the free time to call a friend, work out, read a magazine, or even (gasp!) take a nap.

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