

Is there an art to co-parenting?

The reason for writing this article is to get a focus on how our relationship as parents can influence the future well-being of our child. Although, this subject is not often raised as a topic of conversation, I want to raise it, so that it does become a primary topic for discussion amongst parents.

Let me start by giving my definition of the term 'co-parenting':

“Co-parenting is two or more people working together and supporting each other in the goal of bringing up their children with healthy personalities.”

Sounds simple, doesn't it? And yet, we do not consider it a topic for discussion until we have our first child, or maybe later when we have our first argument over what is the right way to bring up our children.

We are, of course, misled into believing that what we gleaned from our parents is enough. In my experience, we probably notice parents more when parents are 'not working together', particularly if they publicly display their frustration with each other.

For sure, there is not enough preparation beforehand for us to become effective co-parents for our children, which begs the following question:

“Did you talk about co-parenting and its potential risks with your partner before you decided to have children?”

My guess is most of us would answer 'no' to that question. Mostly, we are unaware of our partner's attitude to parenting, and probably will pacify ourselves with phrases like, “of course, it'll be alright”, “we will work it out” and “let's not worry about it now”.

Whatever our excuse, we will be confronted one day with our different attitudes to parenting and there will be consequences to our relationship and our children's well-being. Nonetheless, it is not too late for us to discuss how we want our co-parenting to work, for example:

How do we manage our religious or cultural differences?

We cannot always see the religious or cultural challenges when we meet and fall in love with someone. But they will raise moral and ethical issues, such as:

- a religious difference might be 'do we circumcise our child or not?',
- a cultural difference might be 'do we educate our girls to the same standard as our boys?',
- a family difference might be 'do we send our children to university or out to work?'

Many more differences will be revealed as our children grow up, but it is how we deal with them that matters.

What about everyday living?

There is no doubt, that our different family upbringing will raise issues in our parenting, and our children will experience our differences. For example:

- One parent believes it is OK for their child to leave food on the plate that he or she does not like, whilst the other parent believes the child should eat what is put in front of them.
- One parent is a vegan and the other is not, and they both believe their child should follow their preferred food regime.
- One parent believes a child should be left to cry it out, whilst the other wants them to stop crying.
- One parent is always giving their child sweets and presents and the other believes they should earn their rewards.

What about our role as parent?

- One parent believes children learn best when they are made to feel bad, whereas the other prefers the calmer and more informative approach to learning.
- One parent thinks parenting is a natural process and children grow up without much intervention from adults. Whereas the other parent sees the job is to teach their children, give them firm guidelines and rules to live by.
- One parent believes they should not argue in front of the children, whilst the other believes they must grow up with the reality of life, including family arguments.

And there are many more examples, which I am sure you could tell me about. My point is, as co-parents we have many potential relationship-breaking and child-disturbing challenges, which if not recognised and acted upon will be harmful to our children's future mental well-being.

As said at the beginning, the purpose of this article is to raise this topic for discussion and think of ways we can improve our effectiveness as co-parents. I will start with the following suggestions which are simple approaches to dramatically improve our effectiveness as co-parents:

- Start by talking to each other about co-parenting – it sounds too simple to be true, but it is the fundamental mistake we make in relationships. The key is both parents must have their say, before, during and after having children. Too often, one parent dominates the relationship, but that will not produce an effective co-parent relationship. Both should have equal say and equal weight in discussions over what is a good outcome for their children.
- Listen to understand each other - this follows on from above, in so much as we must 'talk and listen'. This requires discipline on both parties to listen without intervening or criticising whilst the other talks. The longer we both 'talk and listen', the more we will understand each other viewpoints and the easier it will be to find a mutual approach to co-parenting our children - a possible win-win!

*“You make progress when you listen to understand.
You don’t make progress when you listen to blame.”*

- Stand by each other – I often hear a parent rebuke their child and the other parent object, and usually in front of the child. Without prior discussion about how we will co-parent, this will happen. And, having said that, there really is no need to display a lack of consistency and co-operation as co-parents to your child. It takes very little (albeit difficult) to support the other parent in front of the child and talk about it another time.
- Unite as co-parents in front of your children – children develop a healthy personality and mental well-being when their upbringing is wrapped in a blanket of consistency, dependability and firm boundaries. This only happens when parents are on the same page, and their children know exactly where they stand – no confusion, no incongruency and no inconsistency.

Returning to the title, “is there an art to co-parenting?”

I believe there is and all it requires us to do is ‘talk and listen’ to each other, support each other and join together with a united front. The key is to provide an environment for our children to grow up in, which is consistent, dependable with and firm boundaries.

“Remember - when exchanging views on parenting, it is more useful to feel informed and not attacked.”