When Parents Have Different Parenting Styles: 
Believe It or Not ... Kids Can Handle It!

By Charles Fay, Ph.D.

My husband (or wife) isn’t interested in using Love and Logic. He (or she) handles the kids much 
differently than I do. What do I do?

My ex-husband (or ex-wife) rescues the kids (or bosses them around). 
How do I get him (or her) to stop?

In our travels across the country, these questions are some of the most common we hear. Why? Because 
people often fall in love with those who “fill” a part of them they see as missing. Introverted Ivan falls in 
Passive Patty is drawn like a magnet to Take-Charge Tom.

The very qualities that pull us together often become those that threaten to push us apart. What an irony! 
Fortunately, kids don’t need carbon-copy parents ... as long as their parents agree to live by some basic 
guidelines:

Agree to make each other look good in the eyes of your children.

Don’t put your kids in the “best friend” or “counselor” roles! Too often, parents complain to their kids 
about the other parent: “Your father (or mother) just doesn’t understand. If he (or she) would just listen ...”

This places kids in a terrible bind. Should kids be solving their parents’ problems? Absolutely not!

This also makes one parent into the “bad guy.” Soon, children learn how to take advantage of this 
situation for manipulative ends. How sad for everyone.

When we’re upset with our spouse, we must resist the incredibly attractive urge to agree with our kids 
when they say things like, “Dad doesn’t understand” or “Mom’s mean!” When we’re upset with our spouse 
... or ex-spouse ... we must discuss it directly with our spouse ... or ex-spouse. Let’s keep our kids out of the 
middle.

Agree that consistency and follow-through are more important than “perfect parenting.”

Because they disagree about discipline, some parents make the mistake of undermining the limits and 
consequences set by the other. This always backfires, creating kids who disrespect both parents. Deep in 
their subconscious minds, children begin to reason, “If my parents aren’t strong enough to support each 
other, how will they ever be strong enough to keep me safe and show me the way?”

Let’s take a look at just one potential parental disagreement:

Travis accidentally threw his baseball through a window in the home. As a consequence, Dad has 
grounded him for two weeks. Travis’s mother disagrees with her husband’s approach. She thinks it 

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would be better if Travis wasn’t grounded but had to pay for the window out of his allowance.

Is it wiser for Mom to “correct” Dad’s approach? Or would it be smarter for her to support Dad over this issue and talk with him privately about it later? While Mom may not agree with Dad’s stance, it will clearly do more harm for her to undermine him than for Travis to be grounded for two weeks. If Dad is undermined, how open will he be to considering Mom’s ideas later? Not very! If she supports him in the short term, is there a better chance he will change his tune in the future? You bet!

Here’s the question we must ask ourselves:

Is my spouse (or ex-spouse) behaving in an abusive fashion?

If the answer to this question is no, but we’d like him/her to consider acting differently in the future, we’d better back him/her up and discuss this later by saying:

Honey, remember when you grounded Travis for breaking the window? I didn’t want to undermine you in front of him, so I kept my mouth shut. Would you be willing to consider experimenting with something a bit different next time?

Agree to be different.

Our world is filled with different types of people. Some are easy-going. Some are not. Some are very warm. Others are a bit cooler. Some have very high expectations. Some don’t. Do we do our kids any favors when we try to shield them from this reality as they are growing up?

When parents agree that it’s okay to be different, and they don’t fall into the trap of undermining or complaining about each other, their children have a powerful opportunity to learn how to get along with different types of people. Have you ever met an adult who never learned this?

Two friends of mine have a very effective way of answering their children when they hear things like, “Well, Mom says that I can ...” or “Dad’s mean.” It goes something like the following:

Child: “Dad lets me watch TV after 7:30.”

Mom: (with excitement and a big smile) “Wow! You are so lucky to have a dad who lets you do that. That is great! Some kids have parents who do everything the same. How boring that would be.”

Child: “So can I watch this show tonight?”

Mom: (very sweetly) “This is sad. No. Thanks for understanding.”

Remember that lectures work no better with spouses than they do with kids.

People often ask, “How do I get my spouse to use Love and Logic?”
Listed below are some tactics to avoid:

- Saying something like this to your spouse: “You have so much potential as a parent. But you just aren’t applying yourself.”
- Putting your spouse on a point system where he/she can earn extra privileges based on the conscientious application of Love and Logic principles.
- Gushing with enthusiasm each evening as you give your spouse a three-hour overview of Love and Logic, how wonderful it is, and how it will save them from parenting purgatory.

All joking aside, it’s best to take a low-key approach and to remember that modeling is the most powerful tool for creating change in resistant kids ... and adults. Let your spouse see you having more fun and fewer power struggles with the kids. Share some Love and Logic only if they ask about it.

If you can’t agree to make each other look good, go to couples counseling.

When parents sabotage each other, their children always suffer. It’s also not uncommon for kids to be blamed for the problem. Too frequently, I hear people complain, “The kids are driving us nuts. If they weren’t so difficult, our marriage would be okay.”

While difficult kids can really stress a marriage, the following statement often rings truer: “If our marriage wasn’t driving us nuts, the kids wouldn’t be so difficult.”

It’s almost impossible to be a healthy parent when one’s marriage is unhealthy. If this is the case, give yourself ... and your kids ... a gift by seeking couples counseling.

There’s good news!

Parents don’t have to be clones of each other to raise great kids. Thank goodness! My father (yes, that’s Jim Fay!) often remarks about how very different his own parents were. His father parented with lectures, threats, and plenty of decibels. His mother was pretty much a Love and Logic natural. What made it possible for them to raise such a fine man? Simply put, my Grandma Marie did her best to make grandpa look good. And to the best of his ability, Grandpa Frank did the same for her.