

Co-Parenting for All

3/10/2020

If you search for the term “co-parenting” in Google, you’ll find that it is almost exclusively used when two parents who are divorced or separated work together to raise child(ren). I guess the assumption is that if you live together and/or are married, it’s a given that you’ll be amicable and collaborative and will make decisions together about routines, schedules and larger issues. Those are, after all, the goals of successful “co-parenting” for divorced or separated parents. As pediatric psychologists, we’ve worked with *many* parents over the years and can confirm that co-parenting is a challenge for *all* parents, whether they are together or not. Granted, there are challenges faced by parents who are no longer together that can be major obstacles to co-parenting. But, parenting with another person is tough, even for parents who are together.



BEING A PARENT
IS LIKE FOLDING
A FITTED SHEET.
NO ONE REALLY
KNOWS HOW!

So, why is co-parenting so difficult? Well, parenting itself is difficult. But aside from that, living with another person is hard. Sharing decision making with another person is hard. Being okay with things being done another way (i.e., not *your* way) is hard. I know there are couples who always get along, who never disagree, who are totally in sync and always have each other’s back...I mean, I know that *in theory*. I (Sarah) have known some truly amazing couples, both personally and professionally. But I don’t think I’ve ever met an always-on-the-same-page couple. Being part of a couple is messy, even for the best of couples.

So, it isn’t just the “parenting” that makes co-parenting challenging. Don’t get me wrong- parenting is absolutely the hardest thing I have ever done...but being married is a pretty close second. So, the “co-” part of co-parenting can be a huge challenge. It can be tough to see our spouse or partner as *equal partners* with an *equal say* in parenting (and in other domains).

How about we try something out? Think about your home and family and answer the following:

- Who's in charge of parenting?
- Who's in charge of homework/school?
- Who's in charge of home repairs?
- Who's in charge of paying the bills?
- Who's in charge of cooking?
- Who's in charge of cleaning?

If you didn't overthink it and you're like every couple that I've ever met, I'm confident that you answered "me" to at least 1 question and "my spouse/partner" to at least 1 question. There may be some areas for which there isn't a clear "person in charge." But I'm guessing that there is a perception that 1 or the other of you is in charge of certain areas. Whether who's in charge fits into stereotypical gender roles is neither here nor there. I'm not here to tell you who *should* be in charge. I'm just pointing out that even for those who strive for an "equal partnership," it's pretty impossible to share equal responsibility, power and decision making across domains.

So, let's turn back to parenting. There's this idea that moms have a natural, instinctive ability to connect with their children and an innate knowledge of how to be a parent. And, there's a related idea that dads are less involved—their roles may focus more on being the disciplinarian and breadwinner—and leave the raising and educating of the children to the moms. These ideas absolutely have historical roots: women weren't (generally) allowed to work and in a "traditional" family, the man was "head of household"—the breadwinner, disciplinarian and ultimate decision maker. In reality these ideas create a framework for parenting that is a total set-up. They create a lose-lose parenting scenario and lead many parents to feel like there is something wrong with them.

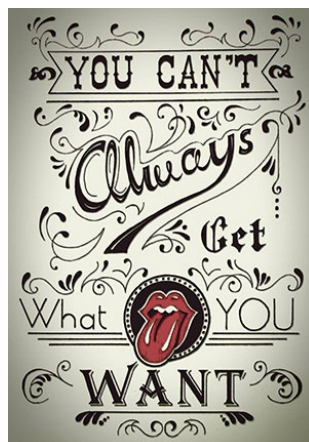
The fact is: not all moms feel an immediate connection to their child(ren) or know how to interact with their child(ren). And, I don't know *any* moms who entered parenthood with exhaustive knowledge of how to be a parent. So, if you're a mom who doesn't have a primal

connection to your child and a fundamental understanding of parenting, you may feel like a failure. At the same time, there are plenty of dads who share an immediate closeness with their child(ren). There are also a lot of dads who take to parenting and seem to know “what to do” as a parent. But, the aforementioned ideas about parenting don’t give dads room to share these strengths. These ideas about moms and dads also don’t encourage or allow moms and dads to share responsibilities and decision making as parents- they aren’t “co-parenting compatible.”

Now, let’s get back to you. When you answered who’s in charge of parenting and homework/school, was it you? It wouldn’t be a surprise if it was. I mean, I’ve just described why we as women may feel a huge sense of responsibility to be “in charge” of the parent arena. But, guess what? I’m about to share something that will be both maddening and a huge relief. Seriously, I’m about to drop a knowledge bomb, but don’t blame the messenger. This information is so important that it’s going to get its own paragraph. Here it is...

You are *not* your spouse’s/partner’s parent. AND, you are *not* your spouse’s/partner’s boss. You don’t need to be 100% in charge as a parent. You can share responsibility and decision making.

Mind-blowing, right?! There is, however, a catch. It’s actually not a small one either. Again, please don’t blame me- I just followed this idea through to its natural consequence: your partner/spouse is allowed to have ideas about parenting and gets to share in decision making. You won’t always get “your way” and can’t just boss around your partner/spouse. Which immediately made me think about the Rolling Stones.



Now, I know some of our readers may be same-sex co-parents who are living together and/or married. Although the discussion about stereotypical gender roles for moms and dads doesn't apply, each mom still has expectations about her role and about being "in charge" of certain areas. So, the importance of sharing in parent decision making and responsibility still applies.

Initially, I thought that this week, you could talk with your partner/spouse about who you see as "in charge" of various areas of your shared lives, your expectations about yourselves as parents, how you co-parent and so on. But I don't know if it's a great idea for everyone. I mean, if you're ready to dive in, then go for it. Maybe you need a little time to marinate on the idea that in order to co-parent with your partner/spouse, you'll need to give up the possibility of always being in charge, always being right and always having things your way.

Not that I think you're a control freak or some child who's going to have a tantrum if you don't get your way! But I do think it might be a good idea to mull over what it would be like to truly share the parent decision making and responsibility with your partner/spouse. What's your initial gut reaction to the idea? What are the pros and cons? We created some journaling pages to help you get some clarity on your thoughts and feelings about this co-parenting thing so check out *What do I Really Think about Co-Parenting?* Sorting out how you feel about things before you bring the discussion to your partner/spouse will ensure that you can be thoughtful, articulate and open-minded when you *do* bring this up to your partner/spouse.