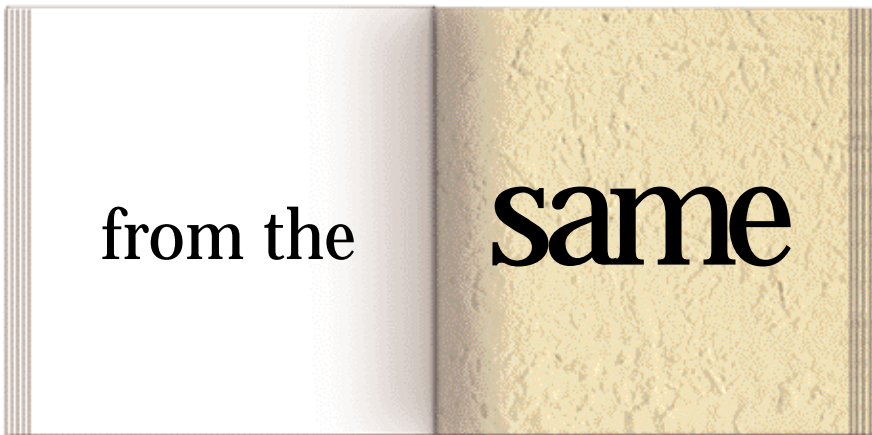




I was in an airport about to board my plane bound for a speaking tour of Russia. I observed a little girl whining and crying while her mother brushed her hair. As I watched more closely, I noticed the mother's lips were pursed tightly as she pulled and tugged angrily at her daughter's hair. In the background, the father was criticizing the mother for the amount of luggage she had packed. The father then yelled at the daughter for not sitting still for her mother, at which point the mother's eyes darted toward her husband and she began yelling at him for yelling at their daughter.

Obviously, the mother and father in the above example are not parenting from the same page. As therapists and counselors, we can help get mom and dad to play on the same team. Parenting is our most difficult job in our lifetime — one in which we get very little support. Parents often feel isolated when it comes to parenting. In the past, families lived close to other relatives. Today, since our society is so mobile, parents often miss out on the support of their extended family. Counselors and therapists are often asked to play the role for this much needed support to families.



The mother and father relationship is like the glue that holds the family together. When that relationship gets watered down, the whole family experiences stress. When there is stress in the family, often children act out.

#### The Importance of Role Models

The International Network for Children and Families was founded eleven years ago to help parents and teachers build relationships with children that foster cooperation, respect and practical life skills. There are currently 452 instructors in 14 countries teaching the parenting course, *Redirecting Children's Behavior*, which is based on the works of Dr. Alfred Adler and Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs. The mission of the organization is to create more cooperation and peace within homes and schools.



Parents often forget that they are role models for their children. It is helpful to gently bring to their awareness the responsibility they carry as role models. Their children look to them to find out what relationships are supposed to be like. Their children are answering questions like what are men like? What are women like? How is conflict resolved? What model for a relationship do they want their child to see? One where there is a lot of yelling, slamming doors and icy silence — where conflict is never really resolved but simply carried over to the next episode? One where parents get what they want by using intimidation and guilt as weapons to manipulate each other?

Or do they want their child to see two people resolve conflict in a way that works for everyone? Differences are respected and discussed openly. Honesty, respect, understanding, compassion, vulnerability, honoring feelings and mutual support are the tools that are used to win cooperation. Sounds lovely, doesn't it? But who, beside the

Brady Bunch, have families like this? These are principles to strive for. As parents work toward this goal, they will develop more confidence and create more peace and cooperation in our homes, our communities and our world. These are new relationship frontiers that basically were unheard of 50 years ago. These skills need to be taught. They are not innate, and most parents do not have good models from which to base their actions.

It is helpful to teach adults to parent with the end result in mind. Try asking them what lessons they want their children to learn. Often parents use expedient discipline methods simply to get things under control. As in the example above, the father yelled at his daughter to sit still for her mother. Yelling worked. It got the girl to settle down. However, what did it teach the daughter? The daughter might have learned that her feelings aren't important. That she can use intimidation to get what she wants. To not stick up for herself when she is hurt. Try asking parents this question: "By the time your children are eighteen, what values do you want them to exhibit and how would you go about teaching them these values?"

### Disagreement

It is normal and natural that parents disagree in their parenting styles. Parents can often work through issues by seeing and understanding each other's perspective. Often, parents do not take the time that is required to do this. Instead they make each other wrong for the way they parent. The following is a list of family issues parents may have a difference of opinion. You might want your clients to write their responses to the following topics as a homework assignment. If this list feels too overwhelming to complete in one sitting, you may want to have them only work on a few issues at one time.

- |           |                       |
|-----------|-----------------------|
| Homework  | Food                  |
| Allowance | Chores                |
| Bedtime   | Expression of feeling |

#### **What routines do we agree to and who will do what?**

- |                     |             |
|---------------------|-------------|
| Morning time        | Dinnertime  |
| Bedtime             | Meal time   |
| Their room          | Discipline  |
| Grandparents        | Family time |
| Religious practices |             |

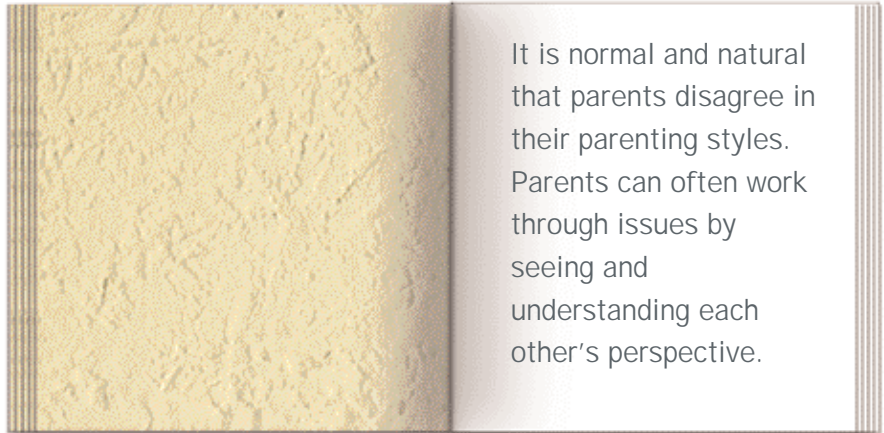
#### **For Teenagers:**

- |          |                  |
|----------|------------------|
| Dating   | Premarital sex   |
| Drinking | Drugs            |
| Make up  | Use of the phone |
| Curfew   | Their friends    |

One of the ways parents can handle disagreements is to agree on a signal to use. When used, it means they agree to go to another room or choose another time to discuss the situation so they can present a united front.

There may be times when it is healthy for a couple to decide to agree to disagree. *The following is an example:*

Andy and Susan had a disagreement about their child riding in the shopping cart. Susan felt it was ok for the child to sit in the shopping cart without being in the special seat. Andy had been a store manager and had seen too many children get hurt from not being in the seat. They agreed to disagree. However, when Susan and Andy went shopping together, Susan honored Andy's wish to have the child in the child's seat.



You may want to have your clients create a list of topics that they agree to disagree about. However, they do need to agree to support and honor each other's feelings and agree not be angry or resentful about these differences. The exception to this agreement is, of course, if one of them felt that a decision was physically or emotionally detrimental to their child. Frequently parents try to compensate for one another. One parent is too firm, so the other parent tries to compensate by being too kind. One way to unravel this situation is to help them see what they are doing, and then help them to empathize with how that must make the other parent feel. Help them to identify situations where they have done this in the past. An assignment you may want to give them is to reverse roles for a designated period of time.

### Parenting Sabotage

Some parents compete with each other to be the better parent. When this occurs, parents frequently sabotage each other's parenting. *For example*, one parent may think it is important to stick to an allowance, and not give a child additional money unless he or she works for it. The other parent may then sabotage the situation by slipping the child extra money. One question you may want to ask your clients is how they sabotage each other's parenting. This question brings the issue up and forces them to be more conscious of their behavior, thereby making future actions a conscious choice.

Parents sabotage each other's parenting especially when they are not getting the love they need from each other. Parents may turn to their child to get their love needs met, or they may find such value in working and spend extra time at work. If this is the case, it is wise to help the couple discover ways to get their love needs met through each other. Too many children miss out on the joys of being kids when they are expected to meet the emotional needs of their parents.

## Guilt and Manipulation

Guilt is an important issue to explore with parents. *For example:* a father who felt guilty about how much time he was spending at work would come home late just as his wife was putting the children to bed and want to interact with the kids. The mother felt very frustrated when he would start rough housing with the kids because she had just spent time winding them down. In this case, it was helpful to explore with dad other times he could be with his children. The father traveled a lot, and one solution was for dad to make a video of himself that the children could view in his absence.

Some parents buy things to alleviate their guilt. This often makes the child feel unloved and that there affection can be bought. Out of their guilt, parents can give in to a child's undue demands and end up doing things that are not in the child's best interest. When parents respond out of guilt, it can also give children an unhealthy upper hand in the relationship.

One of the detrimental things that parents do is to fight about their children in front of them. Parents don't realize this can teach children how to become a wedge between them. Children will often put one parent against the other parent. Children lose respect for their parents when this behavior is allowed, and they also lose self-esteem by learning to manipulate others in order to get what they want.

## Blame

One of the biggest culprits in problematic relationships is blame. It eats away at the bond between individuals and works toward severing the relationship. It is much easier to concentrate on what the other person should or should not be doing than it is to do self-reflection and personal work. Wayne Dyer writes this about blame, "All blame is a waste of time. No matter how many faults you find with another and regardless of how much you blame him, it will not change you. The only thing blame does is keep the focus off you when you are looking for external reasons to explain your unhappiness or frustration. You may succeed in making another feel guilty about something by blaming him, but you won't succeed in changing whatever it is about you that is making you unhappy."

Failure to accept responsibility for one's own happiness puts undue and unnecessary pressure on any relationship. Creating one's own happiness is an inside job.

An exercise to use in situations of blame is to have parents write down three things that they blame their spouse for. Then have them say how they are just like that as well. Parents will be less likely to blame the other person when they can see how they do the same thing. Also, the person who is blaming may need some help in self-acceptance, because we are usually the most judgmental of people who display character flaws of which we have no self-acceptance.

## Forgiveness

Teaching your clients to forgive quickly rather than making their spouse suffer for what they did can be valuable. Getting revenge is like ingesting poison and waiting for your spouse to suffer the consequences!

Parents often use children to fight the battles between them. *For example:* Alice came from a family where she was spoiled, and she married her husband thinking that he would become wealthy and take care of her as she was accustomed. When he didn't become wealthy, she started unconsciously looking for excuses to get out of the relationship. Unconsciously, she allowed her son to be disrespectful and verbally abusive. She then felt justified in wanting to leave the family. After she became aware that the real problem was her belief that she needed to be taken care of, the fighting between her and her son dramatically decreased. She eventually got enough courage to start her own career. Many parents carry around destructive unconscious beliefs. Helping parents to realize that discipline problems with children may really be an unresolved personal issue is important.

## Positive Attitude

Introspection is essential in helping parents to work as a team. Equally as important is teaching parents that they are not the victims of circumstance, but they are actually the creators of their own destiny. Many parents know and complain about what they don't want, but spend little time deciding and focusing on what they do want. It is amazing what can be achieved by this simple method. *For example:* one mother spent a lot of energy dwelling on how unhappy she was about her husband's former wife and her stepchildren. She decided she no longer wanted to have the "war" going on between the two families. With coaching, she was able to create a vision of both families together having a peaceful birthday party. Her vision included sounds of laughter and smells of homemade cooking in the air. Her assignment was to pop this vision in her mind every time she had a negative thought about the other family. She was instructed that negative thoughts attract negative experiences and positive thoughts attract positive experiences. Within three months she was invited to an Easter dinner that became the turning point in the family's relationship. Visualization and intention are simple yet powerful tools to help parents create the kind of family that they dream about.

When parents parent from the same page, there is less stress in the home. When parents learn to support one another, the whole family gets to experience the results. Children learn most from the modeling that occurs in the family. Where there is cooperation and respect between the parents, odds are that the children will demonstrate cooperation and respect also. ▼

Kathryn Kvoles is the author of the book and parenting course, *Redirecting Children's Behavior*. She is also the founder of the *International Network for Children and Families*. For more information about speaking engagements and parenting instructor training for your organization, call (352) 375-6498. For more information on continuing education opportunities, visit the Web site at: [www.redirectingbehavior.com](http://www.redirectingbehavior.com).

Introspection is essential in helping parents to work as a team. Equally as important is teaching parents that they are not the victims of circumstance, but they are actually the creators of their own destiny.