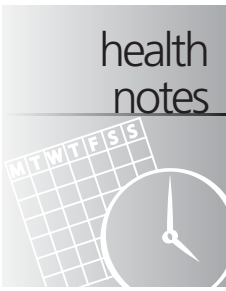


LIVE



NOTICES

health notes
New Year Resolutions: Make The Next One Stick. Mind-Click Partners Inc. is offering a free two-hour hypnosis seminar, Sunday, Jan. 4, 2009 from 7-9 p.m., 1409 Bellevue Ave., West Vancouver. Attendees are asked to RSVP at www.mind-clickpartners.com and encouraged to bring a non-perishable food item for donation to the Greater Vancouver Food Bank

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Dividing the united front

QUESTION:

My wife Jane and I have two teenage children who can be quite challenging. We get into arguments around curfews, video games and homework. I tend to be stricter and I feel undermined and unsupported when Jane will not back me up. I keep telling her that we need to present a united front so that the kids know that they can't get away with breaking the rules. What do you think?

Answer:

The much touted concept of the united front has been a favoured stance in the annals of parenting for a number of years. I find it both dishonest and manipulative. The call for the united front comes, without exception, from the more stringent parent. The phrase is militaristic in its nature as if the parent is going into battle with the child and the more lenient parent is seen as either an ally or an enemy, either with or against the parent making the call.

Fortunately, parents often agree on many parenting issues and challenges around differences do not arise. However, when there is a true difference, suggesting otherwise is problematic. For the purpose of discussion, let's presume that the father is the



parent calling for the front. Here is the probable fallout.

First, the child knows that the front is dishonest and therefore fragile. He knows too which parent made the call and which parent acquiesced. Therefore, all protests will be directed at the acquiescent parent in any attempt to undermine the front line.

Second, the parent who acquiesced will resent the demand for compliance and will have difficulty carrying out consequences when the child breaks the rules. Even if the acquiescent parent can follow through on consequences, she will at some point balance the scales with a number of inappropriate acts of leniency toward the child which further discredits the united front.

Third, the parent who calls for the front, places himself in a precarious position by triggering an unstable triangle. His wife, whose heart is not in the battle, is a reluctant ally, and the enemy, his child, knows the instability of the front line. He sees his father as too weak to win the battle on his own and his mother as too weak to stand against his father. There are no winners here, least of all the parents.

What then, is the alternative to the united front? When there are real differences the effort is to establish a clean, clear, open triangle where all players know the terms of engagement.

Here is an example: Fred feels that his 17-year-old son Mark should have his homework done before going out on Saturday night. Mark's mother Joanne feels that as long as the homework is done by Sunday evening this is OK. After discussing their positions Fred and Joanne are unable to reach a consensus. They agree to disagree and inform Mark of where they stand. At the same time Joanne makes it clear to Mark that if he chooses to leave his homework until Sunday, he will have to deal with his father on his own as she will not be taking sides on any of the fallout.

The advantage of the divided front is that there is no coercion or dishonesty on the part of the parents and little room for manipulation on the part of the child. It works well when parents can respect their differences rather than feel threatened by them. It encourages parents to think carefully before taking a position, knowing that they alone will have to follow through on the consequences, and it presents the child with the information that honesty is paramount, that parents are individuals and that he, as a child, has a choice in how he chooses to function.

If I haven't convinced you yet, let me ask you this simple question: would you coerce a friend into joining you in a position that he did not honestly hold, for the purpose of manipulating a mutual acquaintance. I don't think you would. It might be time to rethink your parenting.

Margaret Ann Speak, M.A., C.C.C., works with couples, individuals and families from a Bowen Family Systems perspective at Family Services of the North Shore. Questions? Write ontbecouch@familyservices.bc.ca or call 604-988-5281.

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