

Strengthening Families through Parenting Partnerships

ABSTRACT:

Often, personality and gender differences between mothers and father can spill over into family life and result in different parenting styles. While these differences have the potential to lead to tension between parents, children actually benefit from these differences and parents can use them to strengthen their families when they value each other's unique contributions. Effective parenting partnerships allow parents to manage these differences through open communication, cooperation, and appreciation. This creates a stable and supportive environment where children learn the skills and confidence to navigate life's challenges.

Keywords: *Partnership Parenting, Coparenting, Collaboration, Resilience*

WHY IS THIS OF INTEREST?

Traditionally, much of the research about early childhood attachments has focused on the relationship between children and their mothers, but what about other caregivers? One group that has been particularly absent from research in the past is fathers. Increasingly, experts are becoming more aware of what children and fathers already knew: the connection between children and their mothers is not the only significant relationship in a young person's life.

Many families are already well aware that mothers and fathers have different styles of parenting. Often, these differences can be seen as problematic when mom and dad can't seem to agree. However, as researchers begin to understand the unique role of fathers in raising young children, it is becoming increasingly clear that when parents make a commitment to parenting as partners, these differences can be a huge asset for their families.

"Mothers and fathers view their parenting roles and their relations with their children differently. Children typically value what each parent gives them."

Pruett &
Kline Pruett, 2009, p.28

"Affirming words from moms and dads are like light switches. Speak a word of affirmation at the right moment in a child's life and it's like lighting up a whole roomful of possibilities."

Gary Smalley

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT THIS?

Just as no two people are alike, no two parents will have the same ways of parenting. This is supported by research, which looks at just what the differences between mothers and fathers are. One of the things researchers have found is that when babies are in distress, mothers will most often respond by picking the child up to sooth them while fathers respond by distracting them (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009).

It has also been found than in the routine of daily interactions, mothers most often pick up their children to care for them, such as feeding or cleaning, while fathers pick children up to play with them and make something fun happen (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009).

What do these differences mean? For many families, these differences in parenting styles can be the cause of some conflict or tension when partners do not feel that the other is pulling their weight, or when partners disagree with what the other one does.

HOW TO PARENT AS PARTNERS

In order to benefit from each parent's unique talents and resources, both partners must commit to supporting one another through cooperation and open communication (Baker, McHale, Strozier, & Cecil, 2010). Communication is key, because it has been found that partners who share the same idea about what they want for their child are often more successful at achieving that. This allows parents to work as a team that has their child's best interests in mind (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009).

One strategy for building a successful parenting partnership is allowing each person to take on complementary roles that suit his or her own parenting strengths, instead of worrying about dividing up the child rearing tasks equally. This way parents are less concerned about how *much* they do, and can focus on how their contributions add to the overall well-being of their family (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009).

Finally, one of the most significant things parenting partners can do is to show appreciation for one another's efforts, and affirm the things that each other does well (McHale, 2007b).

THE GOOD NEWS

The other side of this issue, also supported by research, is that these differences can actually have huge advantages for children who benefit from having all of their needs met by the different adults in their lives (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009). Just as children *need* to be fed and cleaned, they also *need* someone to play with them. Neither mom nor dad plays the more important role here, because both of their contributions are necessary.



DIFFERENT KINDS OF FAMILIES

Not all parenting partnerships are between a mother and a father. Children can have many different kinds of caregivers in the form of extended families, blended families, foster parents, and through other types of relationships. The good news is that parenting partnerships don't have to be between a biological mother and father; researchers are beginning to find positive outcomes for parenting partnerships between other types of caregivers.

For example, one study showed high levels of solidarity in parenting between mother and grandmother partnerships when these relationships were characterized by cooperation, good communication, and emotional support (Baker et al., 2010).

Other research has indicated that the same positive results of effective parenting partnerships were true whether parents lived together in the same household or not (Cabrera, Scott, Fagan, Steward-Streng, & Chien, 2012).

NOT JUST ABOUT GENDER

Although research has found some distinct differences between male and female parenting styles, these are not hard-and-fast rules. In successful parenting partnerships, both caregivers find ways to complement each other's individual parenting style no matter what their genders are (Patterson & Farr, 2011).

As Pruett and Kline Pruett tell parents, "gender is less important than who a particular man or woman is as an individual, and how he or she became that person...our advice is to be yourself first and consider your gender second" (2009, p.30).

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES?

It may not always be easy to create the perfect parenting relationship, but it has been shown that when parents commit to this, their children are better for it (McHale, 2007a). An effective parenting partnership can lead to a closer family relationship, which has been shown to be **a protective factor for children against risk taking behaviours such as drug abuse, gang membership, and victimization** (McHale & Irace, 2011).

Parents who stand behind one another help children experience a predictable **and stable environment**. The skills and assurance that comes from this family cohesiveness help children to confidently navigate through life's challenges (McHale, 2007a). In this, parenting partnerships help young people develop **greater self-esteem and resilience**, which support them in making healthy and safe choices (McHale, 2011, p.290).



To quote McHale, Waller, & Pearson, “children are best served in families where the adults responsible for their care and upbringing—whomever they may be—work **collaboratively and cooperatively**...to promote the child’s safe and healthy development” (McHale, Waller, & Pearson, 2012, p.301).



HOW DOES THIS CONNECT TO START SMART STAY SAFE?

Start Smart Stay Safe (S4) is a strengths-based educational resource utilized by police officers, teachers, and schools in building resiliency and capacity in children and their families. One of the aims of **Start Smart Stay Safe** is to build upon the existing strengths and resiliency of parents and caregivers and their families. Everyone has something important to contribute, and families can help to nourish these contributions by accepting differences as strengths. Parents who recognize that a sturdy parenting partnership can lead to a strong family are able to navigate through the challenges that come with different parenting styles (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009). As Pruett & Kline Pruett state “turning parental differences into family strengths is the keystone of healthy family life” (2009, p.36).

Start Smart Stay Safe also values collaboration and communication within families because we know that talking through issues and supporting each other through challenges helps build family resiliency. The collaborative nature of parenting partnerships means that communication is critical to healthy family functioning. One study showed that parents who communicate with one another about their children felt they were successful in preventing their own conflicts from affecting their parenting (McHale, 2007b). In fact, collaborative decision-making and frequent communication between parents has been linked to children’s social skills and school readiness (Cabrera et al., 2012). Using open communication and collaborative problem solving to navigate conflict gives parents the opportunity to model healthy conflict resolution for their children.

KEY TERMS:

Collaboration: A process of shared decision making and responsibility between two or more partners as they work together to achieve a common goal.

Coparenting: “An enterprise undertaken by two or more adults who together take on the care and upbringing of children for whom they share responsibility” (McHale & Lindahl, 2011, p. 30).

Partnership Parenting: “The parental alliance formed on behalf of the couple and the children, an alliance requiring negotiation, respect, and support that benefits immensely from affection and commitment – all toward the desired end of raising happy and healthy kids” (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009, p. xviii)



Resilience: The ability to ‘bounce back’ from life’s challenges and to use these challenges as an opportunity to become stronger and better able to handle future difficulties.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Each family will find its own way to establish an effective parenting partnership, depending on their unique family structure and parenting styles. Here are a few ideas that you may find useful as a starting point as you begin to think about your own parenting partnership:

- Allow each partner to take on responsibilities that suit him or her instead of trying to split every task 50/50 (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009);
- Focus on what your partner does for the good of the family instead of what he or she doesn’t do;
- Keep the lines of communication open, honest, and respectful (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009);
- Strengthen the relationship between you and your parenting partner by making time to do fun things, just the two of you (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009);
- Take time to discuss what you both want for your child so you are both working towards the same goals (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009).

One of the most important things you can keep in mind is that parenting partnerships are greater than just the sum of their parts (Pruett & Kline Pruett, 2009). That means that the relationship between two parents is just as important to a child as the relationship each of those individual parents has with the child.

“Parents need to fill a child’s bucket of self-esteem so high that the rest of the world can’t poke enough holes to drain it dry.”

Alvin Price



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