

*Assessing the parents approach to who is in charge of parenting is important?
Mother central? Father central? Or Shared.*

Family Patterns of Authority

Children benefit when both parents are on the same team. Getting to that point when the child is emotionally healthy and cooperative is sometimes difficult. It takes far more planning when the child is behaviorally disturbed. Recent research regarding the family situations of most children with emotional, cognitive, physical and/or behavioral difficulties is confirming what schools and social services have been able to see for years. Most children who require extraordinary parenting are being raised by a single mother. For one parent to leave in response to child parenting difficulties makes the situation worse for everyone. The difficulties of finding a cohesive parenting plan can not be overstated. However, unless one parent wants to abdicate and leave the other to become the single, full time parent, a way must be found through the tough decisions. When it comes to the final say of how this child is going to be parented given this set of circumstances and these two parents there are ultimately two primary ways of approaching the task.

Plan A

- Parents both do all of the reading, take all of the classes, attend all of the lectures and become equally educated as to the diagnosis
- Parents both agree on the diagnosis, the problem and the approach to solving it
- Both parents attend all of the therapy sessions
- Both parents apply basically the same parenting interventions as they each see they are needed
- Parents both assign chores, decide when they are done well and apply consequences when the chores is either not done or are not done correctly. Both parents support and back up the other parent in the application of chores and consequences, knowing they are both in agreement most of the time
- Both mother and father plan times when they can get respite from the needs of the child and get away to enjoy each other's company.
- When confronted by a misunderstanding public or extended family, both parents participate in explaining the rationale for the parenting decisions and take responsibility for taking part in the decision making process.
- When there are disagreements as to approach, and thoughtful discussion by equally informed parents does not bring them to a consensus, the parent who is most invested in that particular issue and most affected by the outcome decides and the other parent respects that decision.

Plan B

- One parent, usually the mother, is primarily involved in the reading, taking the classes, attending the lecture and the other parent, usually the father, listens to what the mother has to say and either agrees or commits to making the effort to become as educated and informed as the mother
- Mother informs father, based on her reading and education, what she believes the diagnosis is and what therapeutic interventions would be best to use. Father either agrees with mother or commits to making the effort to become as educated as mother is so he can propose his own diagnosis and solution

- Mother attends the therapy sessions and informs father of the therapeutic approach being used. Father either agrees to it or finds another appropriate therapist.
- Mother is the primary parent. Father supports her parenting decisions and direction. He does not criticize, though occasionally might offer some constructive suggestions at a time when the children are not present.
- Mother is primarily responsible for assigning tasks, following through and imposing consequences. Father, when asked, supports mother by following up on a consequence when the child refuses to do something for mother but will do it for father. Father then gives practice sessions at a time when it is convenient for him to impress upon the child that he or she must do what mother says.
- Father plans times when he can demonstrate his full support and appreciation for the time and emotional energy his wife is devoting to healing their child. Father purchases small presents, sends flowers, and supports her in arranging respite so he can spend time just with her and let him know by his attention how much he appreciates her efforts.
- When confronted by a misunderstanding public or extended family father praises mother's expertise and expresses his full support of her decision making.
- When there are disagreements as to approach and mother is not able to convince father of the rightness of her course of action, unless father believes mother is being abusive or neglectful, he steps aside and mother decides. Father respects that decision.

Several ways to determine who will make the final decision regarding parenting decisions when there is a dispute have been proposed:

- The healthiest parent decides.
- The parent with the healthiest childhood decides.
- The parent with the healthiest relationship with his/her parents decides.

One of the most important criteria, however, is:

- The parent who spends the most time with the child decides.

This decision is revisited whenever one parent believes the other parent is being abusive or neglectful. It is not uncommon for an outside family advisor to help them determine which parent should be making the final decisions whenever there is a dispute.

Whichever of the above criteria a mother and father use to establish who will be the alpha parent when decisions cannot be mutually reached, is fine and acceptable. What is important is that one parent does have final say and the other parent has a way to question individual decisions within that framework while gracefully and without resentment allowing the child to gain the gut level knowledge that the parents have a plan and whatever that plan is, the child is not in charge.

The goal is to make the child feel safe. Whenever the child believes he can get between parents and make parents doubt themselves and each other the child will not feel safe. He will not get the clear message that adults are in charge of his environment. Whenever a child believes he is in charge trust in the ability of the parents to keep him safe is lost. In order for the child and family to heal there must be an organized and clear line of authority visible to all. That line of authority can be along the lines of Plan A or Plan B, but it must be clear and consistent in order for the child to feel safe and heal.