

# When mum and dad don't see eye to eye

The key to resolving parental disagreements is to cultivate effective communication, say experts



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My eight-year-old daughter dropped her new stainless-steel water bottle twice at home in the first month she got it, so my husband insisted she use a cup at home to not wreck the bottle.

I disagreed, as I felt the bottle, which has a cap, is more hygienic, especially if left out overnight. Furthermore, she enjoyed using the bottle and would drink from it frequently.

I felt it would be more effective to remind her to place her bottle away from the table edge, so she would not accidentally tug at its strap, causing it to fall.

It may sound like a trivial matter, but it was one of the times my husband and I disagreed when it came to raising our kids, who are now 18, 15 and eight.

While one of us would usually give in, this time, we dug our heels in, which led to our youngest child feeling confused.

My husband and I share the same view on many issues when it comes to their upbringing.

For example, we do not advocate tuition unless they need and want it. As for screen time, no mobile phones until they are in Secondary 1, and even then, they are given an old device,

with restrictions.

But now and then, something crops up that may see us taking opposing views.

## DIFFERING VIEWS AND THEIR IMPACT ON A CHILD

Experts I spoke to said it is common for parents to disagree when it comes to the upbringing of their children.

It often boils down to contrasting parenting views and styles, which are usually shaped by parents' experiences growing up, said Ms Lee Hwee Nah, director and head of youth service at Singapore Children's Society.

She added that differences could also arise from differing cultures. For example, parents of different races or faiths could have different world views and beliefs.

"Most parents also enter into parenthood without having discussed their expectations and boundaries, as well as agreeing on some general parenting principles," she said.

Some common areas where opinions might differ include setting boundaries with their child on their behaviour, as well as their responses to the child.

For example, when a child starts throwing things, one parent may respond by punishing the child, while the other parent may find it funny and laugh at the child's actions, she said.

But this inconsistency in reactions can cause confusion for the child and affect him or

her emotionally.

National Institute of Education senior lecturer Kit Phey Ling said that when parents use parenting styles they were each brought up with, it could lead to disagreements from time to time.

She once worked with parents who had given their child conflicting advice on how to deal with the bullies in school, which confused and upset him.

The father told the boy to "man up" by hitting the bullies when he was hit by them, while the mother asked the boy to report it to the teacher and pray that they would stop their bullying.

The parents fought over the issue.

Dr Kit counselled the parents, who discussed their growing-up experiences, values and cultures openly, and they eventually came to a compromise on how they should guide their child in managing difficult social relationships.

"When parents have differences in opinion, they should decide how they want to resolve their issues. It can be done in private before presenting a united front to their children; or, if possible, they should model peaceful and productive conflict resolution in front of their children," said Dr Kit.

## WAYS TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS

In the busy day-to-day bustle of life, with attention focused mostly on the kids in the evenings,

parents sometimes neglect to connect and communicate.

But the key to resolving parental disagreements is to cultivate effective communication, said Mr Brian Poh, a principal clinical psychologist at the Institute of Mental Health.

Parents have to be willing to find a middle ground, and recognise that parenting is a collaborative effort that requires flexibility and cooperation, he added.

Some strategies to try:

- **Active listening:** Take the time to listen to each other's perspectives, without interrupting or formulating your own response, suggested Dr Titus Foo, head of research at The School of Positive Psychology. To clarify one's understanding, try paraphrasing what the other parent said. Practise empathy by trying to understand the underlying emotions driving each other's viewpoints, he added.

- **Collaborative problem-solving:** Approach disagreements as a team rather than as adversaries. Parents could first identify the problem, brainstorm for solutions, then weigh the pros and cons of each, Dr Foo said.
- **Respect boundaries:** Establish clear boundaries and focus on the issue at hand, instead of resorting to personal attacks or criticism.

- **Reflect on your upbringing:** Consider how your upbringing and experiences may be

influencing your perspective and approach to parenting, said Dr Foo. "Reflecting on these factors can help you gain insight into your own motivations and biases, allowing for more empathetic interactions."

But differences in opinion may not be all bad.

Ms Amanda Ang, a senior psychologist at The Therapy Room, said that sometimes, differing parenting styles can complement each other. But parents should keep an open mind and be willing to communicate with each other to present a united front to their child.

Experts agreed that, ultimately, parents should prioritise their child's well-being and try to find an outcome they can agree on that supports their child.

My husband and I tried some of the strategies to resolve our differences and decided that our daughter could continue to use her water bottle at home, but with reminders to ensure the strap is not dangling off the table. It seems to be working. But if it does not pan out, I am open to letting her use a cup with a cover at home.

My husband and I are nearly 20 years into this parenting gig, but the incident was a good reminder that, while it is great that we share the same thinking on many issues, it is even better to know how to work through our differences.

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