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Discipline Across Two Households

Conflict is common when kids split their time between different caregivers with different rules. Follow our peace plan and put an end to behavior battles. BY SHARLENE JOHNSON

My 5-year-old has two homes: one with me and a second with her dad, who lives ten minutes away. Her friend Chloe, 6, also has a home away from home. She and her little sister spend a few days each week (and regular overnights) with their grandparents. Another pal, Anna, 4, is equally at home in the house she shares with her mom and at the home day care she attends while her mother works.

Different homes, different adults in charge, different rules. It can be a recipe for discipline disaster, particularly if the adults are divided by divorce, a generation gap, or disparate philosophies. Fortunately, experts agree that young kids can deal with differing discipline styles—what matters is how their caregivers deal with each other. “Children can handle different rules; it’s the conflict between adults that’s confusing for them,” explains child psychologist Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D., author of *Smart Parenting for Smart Kids*, available in January.

If you don’t see eye to eye with a paid caregiver on an important discipline issue, you can, of course, find a new child-care provider. Same goes with your child’s grandparent. It’s tough to fire Grandma, though, so you’ll probably want to make the extra effort to forge a treaty with her. And then there’s the ex factor. Divorced or separated parents may be too angry to speak, much less agree on what to do if little Ryan won’t stay in his room at night. For better or worse, you’re stuck coparenting and have to find a way to communicate.

Allow for Differences of Opinion

Even in the best of circumstances, it’s tough to achieve the kind of consistent discipline that experts advise. But whatever struggles you have with another caregiver, try to present a calm, collaborative relationship to your child. Acknowledge that different people have



BOY: HEATHER WESTON. STYLING BY STEPHANIE D'ULLIO. GROOMING BY NOELLE MARINELLI FOR ARTISTS BY NEXT. HOUSES: DWIGHT ESCHLIMAN/GETTY IMAGES.

different rules, but stick with the facts: "That's the rule at Dad's house, but this is the rule here." Avoid the temptation to add a disparaging comment ("Ms. Kathy is just old-fashioned" or "Daddy doesn't think homework is as important as I do"). "By undermining the other adult, you send a message to kids that they don't need to respect him," says Christina McGhee, author of *Parenting Apart: How Separated and Divorced Parents Can Raise Happy and Secure Kids*. "What you may not realize is that your child may eventually apply that same logic to you."

Make sure your kids know you expect them to obey the adults in other homes, says Wayne Fleisig, Ph.D., a child psychologist at the Children's Hospital of Alabama, in Birmingham, who often counsels families in these situations. For instance, if you're having trouble with sibling rivalry, you could say, "If you hit your brother, there will be consequences at Grandma's house just like there are at this house."

Talk About It

Don't wait until your mild-mannered moppet turns into Captain Tantrum—make a point of talking to your child's other caregiver about your discipline philosophy long before behavior problems crop up, advises Lee Edwards Benning, author of *The Granny-Nanny*. She and her husband have been providing day care for their three granddaughters, ages 6, 7, and 9, in their home since the oldest was just 3 months. "When kids mis-

behave, caregivers have to act. You can't wait around wondering what their parents would want you to do," she notes.

Depending on your relationship with the other adult, conversations about discipline may not be easy—especially if your disagreement is about an action that's already been taken. So always schedule these discussions for a time when the kids won't be around to overhear. "Never try to work out a major problem in front of your child," says Jane Nelsen, Ed.D., author of *Positive Discipline for Childcare Providers*. "It's not fair to put kids in the middle. They may feel like they have to take sides, or they may try to use the conflict to manipulate the adults." In particular, avoid having discussions at pickup or drop-off times, which are often chaotic and emotionally loaded.

And while e-mail might seem like a good way to hammer out a disagreement away from your children's eyes, beware: If your relationship is an angry one, the recipient is likely to read an angry tone into your message. Before you send anything, save a draft and let it sit overnight, McGhee advises. Read it again the next day and excise anything that might seem inflammatory or that isn't directly related to the kids before you send it.

Whether it's your mom, your ex, or your day-care provider, it's good to remember that you all have the same goal: raising good kids. "Instead of focusing on the things you don't agree on, start with what you do," says McGhee. "Maybe you don't agree on how to handle bad behavior, but you can make an



effort to identify values you share, such as wanting your kids to be respectful or to have a good education. Then talk about what you can do independently to support those values.”

You can also neutralize the debate by suggesting that you take the same parenting class—together or separately—or by sharing parenting books and magazine articles (like this one!). Not only will you have concrete ideas to discuss, but tips from a neutral third party are less likely to be shot down by a former spouse who objects to everything you say simply because you

Be clear about the things that are important to you, then let the small stuff go.

said it. Likewise, a grandparent might be more inclined to relax her clean-your-plate rule if the advice doesn’t come from the very child who once sat at the table refusing to eat her squash.

Agree to Disagree

Invariably, there will be differences in how discipline is handled from one adult to the next. Be clear about what’s most important to you, especially with regard to hot-button issues like spanking. Then let the small stuff go—really. You may not approve of Grandpa’s occasional lollipop bribes or the day-care provider’s strict cleanup policy, but your child isn’t going to be irreversibly harmed by a little sugar once in a while or a stint of sorting blocks into color-coded bins. Of course, only you can decide what qualifies as “small stuff,” but being too picky about another adult’s rules will just create needless conflict.

“My ex-wife is looser about some things, like which TV shows the boys are allowed to watch,” says Mike Eyer, a divorced father in Fort Collins, Colorado, who has shared custody of his sons, ages 6 and 9. “We’ve discussed it, but nothing changes.

Sometimes it's frustrating, but what goes on over there is out of my control. All I can do is stick to my values when the kids are at my house." In fact, that's exactly what the experts advise.

If something another caregiver does sets you off, ask yourself what you'd do if a friend did the same thing. Odds are, you'd cut her some slack. Can't let it go? Bring it up, using the same tact you'd show a friend, being sure to offer positive suggestions for how you'd hope to see the situation handled next time.

Practice Prevention

Do what you can to head off foreseeable behavior problems before they begin. It helps if adults give each other status updates at transitions from one house to the next. For example, mention if your child is likely to be unusually hungry, tired, or upset about something that happened. Eyer and his ex-wife talk on the phone almost daily about how their boys are doing, which means nei-

be clear about your own rules and expectations so there's no confusion: "Help your kids make charts to post on the walls to serve as visual reminders when they're there," says McGhee. Keep it simple, and stick to a few rules.

Follow Through

If your discipline plan involves consequences, there are times when both adults may need to cooperate in carrying out a decree imposed at the other house (when video-game privileges are restricted, for instance). This is especially important if behavior problems happen during transition times and consequences can't be carried out immediately. In the absence of a cooperative spirit, though, you'll need to think ahead and have a plan for those situations. It may be that all you can do in the moment is make it clear that your child's behavior is not acceptable and try to head off similar problems next time.

Don't approve of a decision? Offer positive suggestions for how to handle the situation next time.

ther of them is ever far out of the loop on even the smallest day-to-day dramas. While it may be more contact than you can stand, it's good to stay in touch, even if it's just an e-mail now and then.

To minimize problems with scheduling or forgotten sports equipment, use a shared online calendar. Benning's family uses a Google Calendar and lots of checklists. If she knows her grandkids are going to have gymnastics practice after they leave her house, for example, she might limit their outdoor playtime so they're not already tired and cranky when they arrive at the gym.

You can also help kids adjust to differing priorities by giving a little refresher of what to expect at transition times. Offer quick reminders at pickup, like: "After you get home from day care we'll read a book together and then you can play while I get dinner ready." And

If a punishment from another caregiver seems out of line, modification may be in order—but only after you've talked with the other adult. Ideally, you'll decide on a compromise, which you can present as "Dad and I have decided...."

On the flip side, incentives that foster good behavior can be shared across homes too. Child educational therapist Charlotte Reznick, Ph.D., author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination*, worked with one family who used matching marble jars to rein in bickering siblings. "The idea was to 'catch' the kids being neutral or nice to each other and drop a marble into the jar each time. As marbles piled up, the kids received rewards," she explains. "It was too difficult to drag the jars back and forth, but it was easy to set up the same system at each house." The jars worked, and both homes enjoyed peace at last. □