

SYLVIA RIMM

On Raising Kids



A Newsletter to Help Parents and Teachers

Volume 16

Issue No. 4

* A UNITED FRONT **

This is a good time to think about establishing a united front in your parenting. You may have heard your grandparents talking about parenting with a "united front." That unity between parents has been superseded in today's society by a priority for open, honest communication with children, sometimes even if it is about their other parent, and that causes problems for children.

In your grandparents' day, the family with two parents was typical. Children in today's society may have multiple parents and caregivers. Sometimes they have one, three, or four parents. Sometimes grandparents or aunts and uncles help with parenting. According to a Census Bureau report, only half of this country's children live in traditional two-parent families.¹

... the best-behaved children are those whose parents are clear about what they want from their children and go about it in a friendly way
Benjamin Spock

It's important those adults who guide children's lives guide them in a united and reasonably consistent way. Even though the adults may have some differences in their preferred styles of parenting, the view from the children's perspective should be of fairly similar expectations, efforts, and limits.

*Adapted from: *How to Parent So Children Will Learn*, S. Rimm, ©1996 by Crown Publishing Group.

If adults are consistent with each other, children will know what's expected of them. They'll also understand that they cannot *avoid* doing what feels a little hard or scary or challenging by the protection of another adult. Benjamin Spock, in his book *A Better World for Our Children*, stated it well: ". . . the best-behaved children are those whose parents are clear about what they want from their children and go about it in a friendly way."²

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¹ M. L. Usdansky, "More Kids Live in Changing Families," *USA Today*, August 30, 1994, 1A.

² B. Spock, *A Better World for Our Children* (Bethesda, Md.: National Press Books, 1994).

** We have repeated Newsletter Volume 14, Issue 1 because we've had so many requests for it.

Parent Rivalry

Competition invades our families. Underlying parent rivalry are parents' concerns about being good parents. That wish to be a good parent may be internalized as being the "better" parent. Sometimes a parent's effort to be better may cause the other parent to feel that he or she can never be good enough.

One parent may see him or herself as being the best parent by being kind, caring, loving, and understanding. The other parent may see him or herself as being best based on being respected and expecting a child to take on responsibilities and showing self-discipline. Although each parent sees him or herself in these ways, he or she doesn't necessarily see the partner in the way that the partner describes him or herself. The parent who sees him or herself as kind and caring, therefore, may be viewed by the other parent as being overprotective. The parent who sees him or herself as being disciplined and responsible may be viewed by the other parent as being rigid and too strict. They don't see each other in the same way as they see themselves, so they just decide that because their own ways are better, they must change the other parent.

The balancing act approach draws them further and further apart, leaving the children caught in the middle.

After fruitless efforts to change each other, they give up and decide that they must balance out the other parent by becoming more extreme in what they believe. The kind, caring parent becomes more protective in order to shelter the children from the parent who expects too much. The expecting parent becomes more demanding to balance out the overprotective parent. The more one expects, the more the other protects. The more the second protects, the more the first expects. The "balancing act" approach draws them further and further apart, leaving the children caught in the middle, not sure they can ever meet one parent's expectations, but absolutely certain the second parent will approve of almost everything.

If children face parents who have contradictory expectations, and lack the confidence to meet the expectations of one of their parents, they turn to the other parent who not only unconditionally supports them, but accidentally teaches them "the easy way out." The kind and caring parents, without recognizing the problem they're causing their children, unintentionally protect their children when they face challenge. When children have grown up in an environment where one adult has provided an easy way out for them, they develop the habit of avoiding challenge.

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The balancing act increases in complexity when there are three or four parents involved. Each parent is desperately anxious to provide the best parenting to keep their children's love. After divorce, parents are more likely to believe they can tempt children to love them by protecting them the most, doing too much for them, or buying them more.

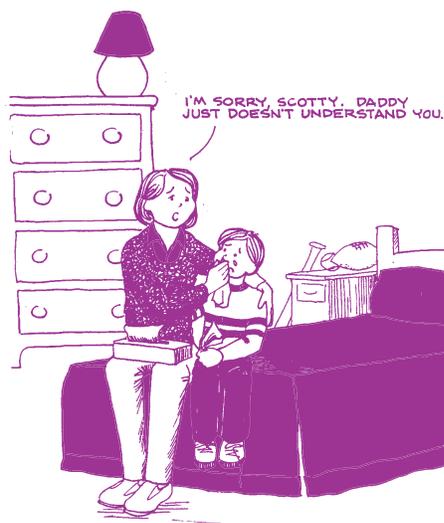
In my books, I've described the four competitive rituals that take place between parents as "ogre and dummy games." There are variations of ogre and dummy games that involve stepparents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles, and those that change between childhood and adolescence. I'll only have room to describe two of these rituals, but they will be graphic enough for you to easily imagine how they could happen in your own home if you don't make specific efforts to maintain a united front. You can read about the other two in either of my books, *How to Parent So Children Will Learn* or *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades*.

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**Sylvia Rimm On Raising Kids
Newspaper Column on Parenting
online at
www.creators.com/lifestylefeatures.html
(next, click on Dr. Rimm's picture)
If this column is not in your local newspaper,
suggest it to the editor.**

Father Is an Ogre. In the family where this ritual takes place, the father is viewed by outsiders as successful and powerful, the mother as kind and caring. A closer view of the family shows a father who has high expectations for his children. They're perceived as being too high by the mother and the children. The children learn to bypass Father's authority by appealing to their kind, sweet mother to avoid his requests. Mother either manages to convince Dad to change his initial decisions, or surreptitiously permits the children to carry out their desired activities anyway. Children quickly learn the necessary manipulative maneuvers. Mother literally, although unintentionally, encourages her husband to seem like an "ogre" by her determination to protect her children from a strict father.

Dad may escape through his continuous work, which further convinces his children to avoid being like their "workaholic" father. As the children mature, their learned opposition to their father often generalizes to angry opposition to other authority figures as well.



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Father Is an Ogre Scenario: Alex, the Underachiever

Mother and Alex are sitting together doing Alex's homework at the kitchen table when Father walks in.

Father: Why do you need to work with Alex all night? He's smart enough to do his work on his own.

Mother: Alex needs my help. His math is hard. We'll be done soon.

Father: (One hour later) Are you still working on that math? You're spoon-feeding him. He's not that dumb. You don't have to do it for him. Send him here. I'm sure I can explain it to him.

Alex: Mom, you help me. Dad will only get mad at me.

Mother: Alex, you better let Dad teach you. (Alex picks up his book and wanders to the other room hesitantly.)

Father: (Looking over material) Let me show you how to do it. Here's how it's done. Now you do the next one. (Alex does one example while Dad watches.)

Father: No, Son, you've done that wrong. Don't you understand? It's easy. (Dad shows him again. Alex does it wrong again.)

Father: (In a booming voice) You're not even trying, Alex! Your columns aren't even straight. No wonder you make mistakes. You're just careless. Weren't you listening when I explained?

Alex: Dad, Mom can help me better. She doesn't yell at me. (Escapes to Mom). See Mom, I told you Dad doesn't understand me.

Mother: I'm sorry, Alex. Here, let me help you. Dad just doesn't know how hard math is for you. (Alex and Mother work together the remainder of the evening, while scowling and angry Father watches a game on TV.)

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Mother Is the Mouse of the House. The ritual where mothers are made to seem like dummies, which results in rebellious adolescent daughters, begins with a conspiratorial relationship between the father and daughter (Karen). It is a special alliance that pairs Dad and his perfect little girl with each other but, by definition, gives Mom the role of "not too bright" or somehow "out of it."

During early childhood, Dad never says no to Karen. She has a special way of winding him around her little finger. Mom admires the relationship, but she is really not part of it. Everyone agrees that Karen is perfect.

Preadolescence arrives and Mom notes a change. Battles are taking place between her daughter and herself. Karen can't seem to take the slightest bit of criticism from her mother. If Mom says black, Karen says white, and vice versa. Karen often goes to Dad because she is having trouble with Mom. He mediates, smoothes things over, and helps Karen to feel better while she snuggles in his lap and complains about how out of it her mother has become.

Karen enters middle school, shows signs of maturing physically, and Dad suddenly begins to worry about his perfect daughter. Danger lurks in the corridors, in the lavatories, at school dances, and at preteen parties. Dad begins his tirade of cautions about cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, and most of all, boys. He must protect his perfect child from the evils of growing up, but Karen exclaims, "Don't you trust me?" Dad answers that he trusts her, but is not sure about the rest of the world. He decides it's time for rules.

Rules mean "no's" and Karen has really never received a no from Dad and those no's feel terrible. She appeals to Mom. Mom sees her first opportunity to build a closeness to her daughter. She actually assumes they're getting closer because her daughter is

maturing. Now there is a new alliance—Mom and Karen against Dad. When that works, Karen is happy. When it doesn't, Karen returns to Dad. Karen learns to manipulate back and forth. She even knows the special categories of requests for each of her parents: clothes and curfew exemptions for Mom, sports and travel for Dad.

The ritual where mothers are made to seem like dummies results in rebellious adolescent daughters.

Now Karen is in high school. Her parents are worried. They suddenly realize it's time for a united front. Mom and Dad are on the same team, and Karen stands alone against them. They're saying "no" more frequently, and even when she performs her best manipulations, Karen can't change their minds. She feels desperate and that neither of them understands her. She can't get them to let her do all the things she wants to do. She reaches out to her peers. She finds some peers who are having similar problems with their parents. They help her to understand that some parents just aren't "with it." Karen now has her own team. Together they will prove they can oppose their parents.

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NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTIONS

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Now Mom and Dad are really anxious. Karen hangs out with the "losers," and her parents have found cigarettes in her room. How can they trust her? Mom tries to talk to her. Dad tries to communicate his concerns. He wants Karen to stop smoking and change friends. She won't. She says she has to be her own person and that her parents must stop controlling her. Karen's parents think they should be stricter. They set curfews, but Karen climbs out the window.



Now Karen's smoking pot. They think she's sleeping with a "druggee." Her journal, which she leaves out on her desk, says she "hates" her parents. She's disrespectful, uses foul language, ignores their rules, and her formerly A and B grades drop to D's and F's. She skips classes. Her parents can't understand what happened to the sweet little girl they remember.

Karen's parents bring her to my clinic. She doesn't want to come. She plops herself down in the chair and says in a disdainful voice, "My mother is stupid. You'd think she was born a hundred years ago."

"And your father?" I ask with hesitation.

"He's not much better. Well, maybe a little better. Neither of them know how to live. I really can't stand them. I can't wait until I get out of the house. I'm counting the days."

Rebellious Karen, who had too much power as a small child and whose father unwittingly encouraged her to compete with her mother, feels rejected, unloved, and out of control. Girls like this take various paths, but they all signal the same sense of lack of power, which they feel mainly because they were given too much power as children. Some say their parents (especially their fathers) don't love them, and they must have love. When a girl is in a boy's arms she mistakenly believes that he loves her, and it feels good. When he leaves her bed for the next one, she feels rejected and embittered and easily accepts the next invitation that feels like love.

Other girls express rebellion silently. Bulimia, anorexia nervosa, depression, and suicide attempts are powerful ways of expressing feelings of loss of control. These illnesses leave parents feeling helpless and blaming each other. They put adolescents or young adults in control of their parents but not in control of themselves. The wink-of-the-eye between Daddy and his little girl that puts Mother down as the "Mouse of the House" will become the preadolescent daughter's roll-of-the-eyes at her mother. When Father says no as well, that daughter feels rejected by both Mother and Father, increasing the likelihood that she'll go from bed to bed in search of love to substitute for the rejection she now feels.

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*Adapted from: *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades—And What You Can Do About It*, S. Rimm, ©1995 by Crown Publishing.

Family Achievement Clinic
Sylvia B. Rimm, Ph.D., Director

Family Achievement Clinic specializes in working with capable children who are not performing to their abilities in school. Gifted children are the clinic's specialty. The clinic also offers a comprehensive range of psychological services centered on children, adolescents, and their families. Services include therapy for underachievement syndrome, attention deficit disorders, anxieties, and oppositional problems, as well as parenting and marriage therapy, divorce counseling, and career planning.

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How to Avoid Ogre and Dummy Games. The key to avoiding ogre and dummy games is respect. If parents both voice and show respect for each other, children will respect their parents. Ogre and dummy games can be corrected by parents recognizing or being aware that they exist; they require cooperation and compromise. Here are some suggestions:

- **Make it clear to your children that you value and respect the intelligence of your spouse.** Don't put your spouse down except in jest and only when it's absolutely clear that you're joking. Use conversations with your children to point out the excellent qualities of your husband or wife.
- **Be sure to describe your spouse's career in respectful terms.** In that way, neither of you feels as if you're doing work that the other doesn't value.
- **Don't join in an alliance with your children against your spouse in any way that suggests disrespect.** Sometimes parents do this subtly, as in, "I agree with you, but I'm not sure I can convince your mom (or dad)." If you communicate to your children that you value their other parent, it will almost always be good for your children, for your spouse, and for you. In adolescence, just a few slips may initiate disrespect.
- **Reassure your oppositional children frequently of their parents' mutual support for them.** Be positively firm in not permitting them to manipulate either of you. They may perceive spousal support of each other as a betrayal of themselves and will feel hurt or depressed. You should assure them frequently that spouses can respect each other and still love their children. One of the parents (the "good" one) will easily be placed in the position of mediator by these children in order to persuade the other, unless the parent absolutely refuses to play that role.
- **When your children come to you to complain about their father or mother expecting too much of them, be alert not to get caught in the manipulations.** They're hoping you'll help them get out of what the other parent has asked them to do. You'll want to respond in kindness while

maintaining a message of respect for your spouse. If the child says, "Mother (or Father) expects too much of me," an example of an appropriate answer is:

"Your mother expects this of you because she knows you're capable. If she didn't expect it of you, it would mean that she didn't believe you could do it. You should be pleased that your mom expects it. After you do it, Mom will be proud, and you'll feel good."

This kind of response, whether related to Father or Mother, gives children a message of confidence. Most of all, it provides the united expectations that permit your children to build self-confidence through achievement.

Abraham Lincoln addressed our nation as he faced the hard decisions that led to the Civil War and concluded, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." Perhaps this important observation about our country has even more applicability within our families.



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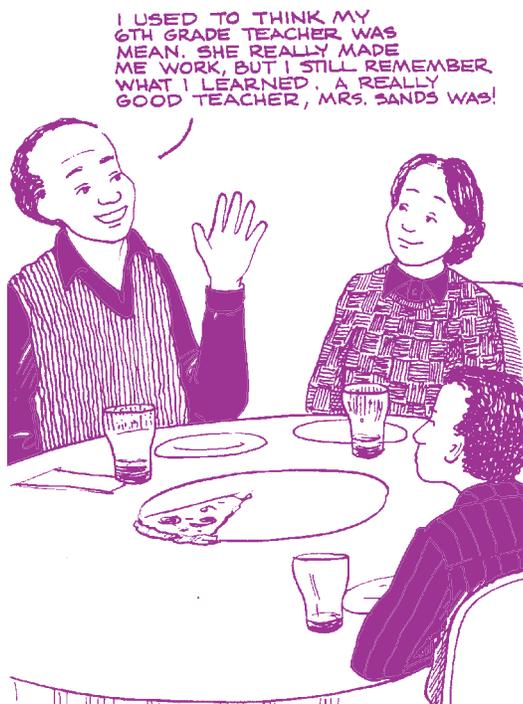
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THE PARENT-TEACHER UNITED FRONT*

Most teachers became teachers because they want to teach children. They usually wish to make a positive difference for them.

Parent-teacher conflicts emerge mainly because some teachers have different philosophies than some parents about how children should be taught. Those parents believe their philosophies are better than those held by their children's teachers. The parents may be right. The teachers may also be right. The issue is that when teachers and parents disagree on how children should be taught, we have a mismatch of philosophies that could destroy the united parent-teacher front.



If educational philosophies between teachers and parents differ in directions that encourage children to do more than the teacher expects, it probably won't cause any problems for the children. They'll continue to receive a message of responsibility. However, if the philosophy of the parents differs from that of the teacher so that it provides an easy way out for children, or if it describes the teacher's philosophy as inappropriate, irrelevant, or boring, it provides an excuse for children not to accomplish what the teacher expects. Parents should not be sharing their positions about teachers with their children if there is the risk of permitting them to subtly escape from school responsibility.

Consider that your children are sitting in the classroom and are faced with tasks or assignments: some that are interesting, some not-so-interesting, some tiresome, and some repetitive. If they've received the message from you that these aren't worthwhile projects, why would your children consider it important to fulfill the teacher's expectations? They know they can come home and find an empathic ear in their mother or father who basically agrees that the assignment was inappropriate to their interest or intelligence, their use of time, or for some other reason. They will be quick to call it boring.

If you want your children to achieve in school, give clear communications to your children about respect for teachers. Let them know that teachers are people who are devoted to children and to making a difference for our society through education. If you show them you respect educators, it will go a long way toward encouraging them to feel positive about their teachers and about school. It will make a great difference in their entire attitude about school learning and achievement. This is no small issue because there have been many parents who have done just the opposite.

*If you show them you respect educators,
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It's equally important that teachers give a message of support for parents. If teachers aren't supportive of parents and aren't saying positive things to children about them, they may render parents powerless to follow through on teachers' suggestions or recommendations at home. Teachers should be especially careful not to talk to other teachers negatively about parents. That may easily happen when parents volunteer in schools. If children hear about the opposition between teachers and their parents, it may have an adverse effect on the parent-child-school relationship. A message of respect for parents, given by teachers, and for teachers given by parents, facilitates children's learning and achievement in school and at home.

*Adapted from: *How to Parent So Children Will Learn*,
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Parent Pointers

ANTI-ARGUING INSTRUCTIONS*

1. When arguers come at you, they'll always choose an inconvenient time because they instinctively know you're vulnerable. First, remind yourself not to say yes or no immediately. Instead, after they've made their request, ask them for their reasons. If you've asked for their reasons, they can never accuse you of not listening. Also, you'll feel better by not cutting off their expressions of feelings, and they'll feel better because they've had plenty of time to talk. (Talking makes them feel smart.)
2. After you've heard their reasons, say, "Let me think about it. I'll get back to you in a few minutes" (for a small request; later for a larger one). There are three marvelous benefits to the second step of this arguing process. First, it permits you to continue to be rational (that's what you wanted to be when you accidentally trained your arguers). Secondly, it teaches children to be patient. Third, because arguers are often bright, manipulative children, since you haven't yet responded with either a yes or no, they know that their good behavior increases the likelihood of your saying yes. Therefore, while you're taking time to be rational and while they're learning patience, these lovely, dominating children will be on their best behavior. How nice!
3. Think about their requests and their reasons. Don't be negatively biased by their pushiness. If your answer is yes, smile and be positive and enthusiastic. Arguers rarely see adults smile.
4. If your answer is no, and you do have the right and obligation to say no sometimes, then say no firmly. Include a few reasons as part of your refusal. Absolutely never change your decision and don't engage in further discussion. Don't let them make you feel guilty. It is healthy for children to learn to accept no's, specially from those who love them.
5. If they begin to argue again, review with them calmly that you've heard their request, you've listened to their reasons, you've taken time to think about them, you've given them your answer and your reason, and the discussion is now over. Don't get back into a discussion on the initial request.

6. If they continue arguing and they're below age ten and not too big, escort them to their room for a time-out. If they're too big for you to time them out, go calmly and assertively to your own room and close and lock your door. If they beat on your door, ignore them. Relax with a good book. They'll learn that parents have earned the privilege of saying no. They'll also have learned that they may continue to have the opportunity to remain children. They may not appreciate the latter at the time. However, your home will become a more pleasant and positive place in which to live, and your children will find that you are positive, fair and rational, but not a wimp, and they'll respect you.



OTHER WAYS TO DECREASE ARGUING

- Don't call your arguers "lawyers."
- If you have arguers, don't brag to Grandma or a neighbor about your children's creative arguing skills. It will make them more determined than ever to argue until they win.
- Don't use "I told you so" when your arguers finally give up the battle. The more determined you are to let them know that you're right, the harder it becomes for them to admit their own mistakes.
- Occasionally admitting your own flawed reasoning in an argument with someone else, and recognizing your approaches to addressing error, will model for your children the way to admit mistakes (if you have ever made any). **Humor helps!**
- If you habitually lose your temper, children interpret that as a weakness. They will style their arguments to last as long as your temper holds out. As they continue to push, you'll find yourself losing your temper more often. Review *Anti-Arguing Instructions* again and again. **It works!**

*Adapted from: *Learning Leads Q-Cards—Parent Pointers*, S. Rimm, ©1996 by Sylvia Rimm.