

How important is consistency really?

Separated parents may take issue with each other if there are any differences in parenting style, expectations or structure.

However, while consistency of parenting style, expectations and structure are helpful they are not rigidly required. Even among intact families there can be remarkable differences between the parents yet the children are not harmed by the experience. Other evidence that children are not necessarily harmed by differences in style, expectations or structure comes by looking at the normal course of children's lives in areas other than home life.

When not at home, children may be subject to the care of alternate care providers, schoolteachers, baby sitters, coaches and instructors. Suffice it to say; virtually all children learn to differentiate the styles, expectations and structures imposed by all these different people and situations and thrive. Hence children learn to run during soccer, yet walk on the deck at the swimming pool. Whereas in one class they may be required to sit quietly, in another they may be allowed to ask questions directly of the teacher. Therefore different teachers will impose a variety of expectations and children learn to differentiate between them and manage accordingly. The only way a problem would develop is if one teacher demands of the children that they follow the same rules in the other teacher's class as their own.

As parental differences become known, some parents may seek to use these differences as cause for limiting the other parent's relationship, influence or time with the child or may seek to impose their style, expectations and structure, or way of doing things on the other parent.

Parents need to appreciate they can have different styles, expectations and structure, as does virtually every teacher have their own way of managing a classroom. Assuming a parent's behaviour is not lawless or abusive and the child progresses developmentally appropriately, different parental styles, expectations and structure can actually benefit

the child as the child learns to adapt and manage a variety of situations.

With regard to child development, it is usually not parental differences that is harmful to children, but rather conflict between parents over their differences. Children can adapt to parents' differences but being drawn into their conflict is distressing and distracting.

Parents who are distressed over their differences are advised to determine if the differences are truly significant or just irksome to themselves before raising objections. If the child is perturbed by parental differences and brings issue from one parent to the other, it can be advisable to redirect the child back to the other parent to discuss the issue directly. In so doing, the child learns to communicate their concerns directly and parents maintain a more appropriate boundary between themselves. This is in much the same way as one teacher wouldn't take on the issues of another teacher, but would redirect the student to deal directly with the other teacher.

Given the opportunity most parents appreciate being able to manage their own relationship with their children without intrusion. If a parent looks unreasonable, it may be that they are just annoyed for having their style, expectations and structure dictated by the other parent. Parents are advised to be certain parental differences are truly problematic before taking issue. If unsure, parents are advised to consider obtaining guidance from a parenting expert with expertise working with separated parents.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847

gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.