

## ***Parenthood (6): A Unified Front***

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**T**he child's motto: "Divide and Conquer." At least that's the way it seems sometimes. In their struggle between free moral agency and parental authority, children will test the limits of their parents' resolve and consistency.

This testing process involves weighing one parent against the other. Which one is "soft"? Which one threatens but rarely spansks? How far can I go before each one goes nuclear? What is their decibel threshold? Which one will let me have candy at the store?

What parent has not granted a request only to find that the child had earlier asked the other parent and had been denied? Children learn early how to beat the system. Therefore, it is important that mothers and fathers close the loopholes in the system and present a united front to their children.

Ideally, this process begins *before* marriage as the couple evaluates their prospective partner in light of how they would likely handle children. But as parenthood becomes a reality, a mother and father must be allies who stand together with a common philosophy.

It is extremely unwise for one parent to take issue with the other on a matter of discipline in front of the children. Yet I have often seen the "soft" parent interfere and overrule the efforts of the other to administer discipline. This sends a fuzzy and conflicting message to the children: if mom and dad cannot agree on my behavior, how should I know what is right and wrong? If the matter is serious and there is legitimate concern for injustice, perhaps it would be more appropriate to call the disciplining parent aside and clarify the issue rather than jump in and risk undermining parental authority.

Further, it is unfair for one parent (usually the mother) to say, "Just wait till your father gets home; then you're gonna get it!" This behavior only reinforces the weakness of the one parent in the child's eyes and makes an ogre of the other parent. One parent should not be the "spanker"; both should exercise the authority to immediately correct the problem when it arises.

These observations may suggest that raising children is tantamount to warfare. It is, in a sense. No, our children are not the "enemy." But the essence of warfare is resistance to imposed authority, and children will forge their self-identity in part by resisting parental rules and regulations.

In parenthood, contradiction leads to confusion, and consistency promotes confidence.