

What's a Nice Couple Like You Doing in a Fight About Discipline?

By Bette-Jane Raphael

My partner and I have always had our fair share of differences—and then some. If we were any further apart temperamentally, we'd be classified as different species. My mate, a lawyer by profession, is disciplined, self-contained, and inner-directed. I am as disciplined as a freshly adopted mutt, as self-contained as The Oracle at Delphi, and as inner-directed as your average preschooler. He has orderly habits and a demeanor that remains relatively unruffled in the face of everyday problems. My habits are so disorderly that they could more properly be called whims,

and I tend to behave as if there *are* no everyday problems, only unmitigated disasters.

If we had taken an empirical view of the matter, we might have seen these differences as evidence that our relationship had little chance of success. However, we refused to let the mere fact that we were ill-suited keep us apart. And over the years we managed to overcome our diversity enough of the time to be happy together, with each of us keeping his peculiarities more or less to himself. My partner never demanded that I be as neat as he was—though he mused aloud that Stephen King's next horror novel could be set in my closet—and I never expected him to adopt my preferred behavioral imperative: Keep a routine, and you *become* routine. We even managed to learn a few things from one another.

This precarious equilibrium received a reverberating jolt when our son Jacob was born. Almost immediately, we found that we couldn't easily separate our attitudinal differences on child rearing. Problems arose the first night Jacob spent under our roof. While I jumped out of bed if he so much as sighed, my mate demonstrated that he can sleep through a baby's crying as easily as he can sleep through my mother's conversation. His expressed attitude was that at some point babies have to learn to sleep through the night—unless, of course, they are baby owls. I maintained that there was no hurry, and that Jacob could always learn to do that in college.

As time went on, it became apparent that our most strenuous disagreements occurred over the proper way to discipline our son. I was constitutionally unable to deny my child anything, and I could no more punish him than I could put him out to sea in a dinghy. On the rare occasions when I did say no to him, my



partner looked at me with as much incredulity as he did the day, early in our relationship, when I told him I weighed 110 pounds.

My mate considers disciplining children to be as necessary a parental responsibility as feeding them. He believes that if a child misbehaves, his parents have a duty to enforce behavioral rules by alternately scolding and punishing him. I believe that if a child misbehaves, his parents have a duty to enforce behavioral rules by alternately pleading with and bribing him.

It's not just that I'm a poor disciplinarian. I generally judge our son's behavior more leniently than my partner does, and see fewer behavioral infractions. (Didn't Toulouse Lautrec also write on walls when he was a child? Don't all 7-year-old children like to call other kids names like "poop face"?)

I also tend to see my son's side of things, a point of view that is guaranteed to thwart disciplinary urges. When he smacks another kid during a birthday party, and then defends himself by citing extreme provocation—i.e., "He spit in my ear"—I have trouble getting my dander up. Wouldn't I smack any bozo who spit in my ear?

I think, too, that I sometimes see my own childhood trespasses reflected in Jacob's misbehavior. I can't become too angry when he cheats at games, for instance, because I remember cheating at games myself when I was a child. (This, my partner says, is not a memory to cherish.) In fact, it seems to me that my father even helped me cheat. At least he always indicated where the Old Maid was among his cards, probably out of a fear that if I didn't win the game, no man would ever take over the responsibility of buying me Mary Janes. I argue that I'm a fairly honest adult today, despite these murky doings, and that just because Jacob tries to rearrange the dice to suit his needs during Monopoly, it doesn't necessarily mean he is destined to be a star witness at Senate investigations into organized crime.

Whenever my partner imposes discipline, I usually object. I do this in a variety of ways: When he threatens to spank Jacob for lying through his brown teeth about eating a forbidden piece of chocolate, I remind him that rearing children does not refer to hitting them on the rear end.

When he sends Jacob to his room for shaking his freshly bathed behind at us in a pre-collegiate imitation of mooning, I defend his behavior as being not cheeky, but self-expressive. "He can express himself with his crayons," my mate rejoins, "not his tushy."

I don't mean to suggest by all this that my mate treats our son like a West Point Plebe. In some ways, he is more lenient than I am. Over my objections, for example, he supported the idea of a Swiss Army knife as a present for Jacob's seventh birthday, on the grounds that it would teach our child the responsible use of a potentially dangerous tool. Finding the logic of this idea somewhat elusive, I dryly remarked that if buying him a knife would teach him responsibility, we could do a really good job by getting him an Uzi submachine gun.

My mate is a loving, cuddling dad, a 160-pound sprinter

who dutifully loses wrestling match after wrestling match to a child opponent. He's read Berenstain Bear books so often that he feels he knows them personally, and he's probably played more Sunday baseball games than Lou Gehrig. Moreover, he bakes birthday cakes that would feel at home on the dessert cart of any restaurant in Paris.

It's just that he counts among his parental duties the task of turning a household Hottentot into a civilized human being, one who knows that getting his pediatrician's attention by yelling, "Freeze, dirtbag," is a punishable offense.

Realizing that I perform this duty much less efficiently, our son naturally misbehaves more for me than for his father. I am the one for whom he refuses to get dressed, claiming, from a prone position on his bedroom floor, that he cannot put on his clothes because he's been wounded in a skirmish with one or another imaginary army. My mate, of course, has little sympathy for such discipline-related difficulties, confining his attempts at comfort to pious intonations about my reaping what I've sown.

Otherwise, though, he no longer hassles me about my shortcomings as a correction officer. Because, although neither of us has changed his basic attitude toward discipline, we have come to terms with the fact that we will never see eye to eye on the subject, and that this isn't the worst thing in the world. We've even learned to see our various attitudes as extensions of our other differences, differences that attracted us to one another more than they ever kept us apart. They are things we love, as well as resent, about one another. My partner can't be deeply angry at my inability to deny our son anything, not when I remind him that I've never been able to deny *him* anything either. And I can't be too upset by his attempts at maintaining discipline, not when I recognize his behavior as a natural extension of the orderly man with whom I fell in love.

In any case, the problem has lessened over the years, as each of us has subtly influenced the other. Nowadays, I don't *always* let Jacob get away with everything, and my mate occasionally shakes his head instead of his finger at our son's antics. We applaud one another's signs of conversion, limited as they may be. Recently, for instance, when I sent Jacob to his room because he called *me* "poop face," his father gave a nod of approval.

Mutual approval is easy, considering the product of our mortal efforts. Between us, we seem to have created some sort of positive balance in the cause of disciplining our son. He doesn't spit, bite, or steal hubcaps, and as far as we know he isn't wanted by the juvenile authorities in any of the 50 states. Actually, he's a pretty good kid.

Maybe he's been lucky to have parents who represent different viewpoints on the matter of discipline. Maybe it's given him some interesting ideas about the interplay of human temperament and the human heart—among them, perhaps, the idea that love and disagreement are not mutually exclusive phenomena. ■

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