

Should parents always be in agreement on methods of rearing their children?

We'll admit that it's a lot easier on the children when parental views on child rearing are in harmony, but in a happy family there may still be some differences between parents ---- and these do not necessarily spell disaster for the personalities of the children. Many adults can remember comfortably that in their childhood there were some things that you couldn't get away with if father were around, yet these were things that mother might conveniently overlook. Sloppy table manners would bring a sermon from father and a threat to send someone away from the table. Mother, whose own standards had been eroded through the years of mopping faces and floors, might discharge her obligation with an absent-minded reminder to Susie that it was really time for a six year old girl to use her fork. But mother couldn't stand "fibbing" as she called it and was very severe with the culprit who told tall tales. Father, didn't see why she was so upset because this was "just a phase that all children go through". Mother didn't mind quarrelling among her children and usually didn't interfere unless there was real danger. Father said that in his family everyone learned to get along with everyone else and he couldn't see why his kids couldn't learn also. Father favored punishments in which the culprit felt his anger. Mother contained her anger (although her frown was terrible) and favored banishment of the culprit to his room or the deprivation of privileges. Mother and father appeared to accept these differences in each other in an amiable kind of way and the children accepted these differences in their parents without major conflict.

In a family that is bound together by affection such differences are easily accommodated. And some differences in child rearing practices are certain to exist if

we consider that the two parents involved were each reared in families that very likely had their own styles of child rearing and most parents tend to rear their children along the same lines they had been reared themselves. Many parents discover that as the children develop and as their own marriage grows in depth and quality, their views on many subjects, including the rearing of the children come closer together, each partner consciously and unconsciously taking over some of the views of the other.

In a marriage where there is fundamental harmony the long talks between parents after the children are in bed sometimes clear up some differences. "Don't you think you're being too strict with Arthur on that broken window?" says Arthur's mother to his father. "It'll take him weeks and weeks to pay for it out of his allowance." "Well, he has to learn a lesson. I remember a lesson like that when I was a kid, and I never forgot it." "Maybe you could have learned the lesson with one half of the punishment as well as with the whole load." "Do you really think I'm too tough on Arthur?" ---- "Sometimes. He's a pretty good kid, and he was already broken hearted about the window. I thought you rubbed it in too much." And so they talk on. "Well, I'll watch that," says Arthur's father. "But while we're on the subject, I'd say you go too far in the other direction. You baby him too much. A boy of eight needs to learn how to fight his own battles. You didn't have to get so upset when he got into that scrap with the Sullivan boy." "But Henry, that Sullivan boy was just pounding him." "Mary, it would have helped you a lot to have had a couple of brothers. Arthur can take care of himself. I've seen him. Don't let a little tussle like that throw you."

This kind of exchange goes on between parents everywhere. And when there is love between the parents these candid discussions and honest criticisms of each other give each parent the opportunity to examine his own beliefs and practices and

modify them when necessary. But when there is deep conflict between parents such criticism may be taken as an attack and the discussion of children and rearing may become the starting point for bitter accusations.

Just as children are involved in parental love, children can be involved in conflicts between the parents. When the differences in child rearing practices between two parents also reflect the antagonisms between the two parents a child cannot easily reconcile these differences within himself. Since the child models his conscience after his parents, and takes his parents' discipline into his own personality, he sometimes finds himself with two warring parents imbedded in his own conscience. The too strict father and the too lenient mother are sometimes still fighting for supremacy in the dark reaches of conscience.

I once knew a grown man who exhibited a pattern of behavior that puzzled everyone who knew him. He was a disciplined scientist who drove himself mercilessly in his work. And yet whenever he suffered disappointments he would lapse into ludicrous self-pity and complain to everyone he knew that he was not appreciated, that everyone took advantage of him, that he was lonely and unloved and that life was not worth living. His friends knew that at such times there was nothing better to do than to listen sympathetically, assure him of his worth, commiserate with him on the follies of mankind, and let him slowly pull himself together again. This contrast in personality between stern self-discipline and self-indulgence almost exactly reflected the personalities of our friends' parents. There was a strict, iron-willed father, much feared and much loved by his son. There was a sad, gentle, self-pitying mother whose love centered on her son, who protected the boy against his stern father, consoled him with lavish affection for all small hurts and indulged him on every score to make up for the strictness of the father. The warring parents were

taken over into the child's conscience in the form of strict self-discipline alternating with self-pity and self-indulgence in this strikingly incongruous way. And just as the two parents could never conciliate, the two factions of conscience could never be brought into harmony.

In our earlier examples of the differences between parents that do not disunite parents it seems that children can reconcile these contradictions in the personalities of their parents and need not suffer conflicts if the marriage itself and its harmony has somehow given unity even to the contradictions.

Yet we know that not all children whose parents have had conflicts in marriage have grown up with distortions of personality. Certainly we all know children who have grown up in the midst of marital conflict who have come through with a minimum of scars and who have in fact created good marriages for themselves and have been happy and successful parents. So it seems to me that in this discussion we need to find out under what circumstances marital conflict will create serious difficulties in children and by what means these disturbances can be avoided or kept to a minimum.

Suppose, for example, that a mother who is disappointed in her husband and feels unloved and rejected should invest all her unspent love on her little son. A little boy who must make up to his mother for his father's failures as husband is a boy who bears an intolerable burden. Every little boy likes to imagine that he can have all his mother's love for himself and he likes to pretend that he is a daddy and can take his father's place. And every little boy needs to give up this day-dream in the course of his early years in order one day to fully love a woman and become a husband and father in his own rights. When a boy can live this day-dream with his mother, is allowed to take his father's place, as it were, his emotional development and his capacity for mature love will suffer. Further, the little boy must inevitably feel

guilty in relation to his father, for having taken his place in his mother's affections. The whole relationship between child and mother and father becomes distorted and we can say that this child is drawn into his parents' conflicts in a way that may damage his future.

But if two parents who have not yet solved their marriage problems can be aware of the effects upon their children it may be possible to avoid visiting some of these problems on their children. The mother who fully understands the emotional needs of her son may be able to avoid the temptation to lavish her love on her son and allow him to take his father's place. She will also employ her wisdom to support the boy's relationship to his father and to help him achieve a positive identification with his father, and as far as possible keep her personal conflicts with the child's father from interfering with the relationship of son and father. In this case we can say that the conflict between the parents remains unsolved, but the parents' sensitivities to a child's needs have kept the conflict from crippling a child's development.

Or consider the case of the child who finds himself in the midst of open conflict between the parents. He may be the witness of violent parental quarrels in which one or the other of the parents threatens to leave. "I used to lie in bed and tremble when I heard them quarrel," a grown man told a social worker in a family counseling agency. "I was afraid they were going to get a divorce. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. I knew a boy who lived in an orphanage and I thought that's what will happen to me!" There is no greater terror in all of childhood than the fear of abandonment by his loved parents. What else can a child make of his parents' quarrels and threats? Or he may hear his parents argue as to which parent will get the children in the event of divorce. And the child, wanting both parents

and loving and needing both, feels as if he were being cut in two. Parents in conflict who have wisdom about their children and their feelings will spare the children from witnessing or overhearing such violent quarrels. It is enough for the children to bear the burden of their knowledge that all is not right between their parents. They can be spared terror and helplessness and the spectacle of two adults out of control.

Sometimes, too, a child acquires the bitter knowledge that he is the only reason his parents are staying together. He may come to believe with his child's wisdom that somehow his very existence has created a problem for his parents and feel, uncertainly, that he is somehow to blame, just in having been born. I have known such children and have seen how sometimes this has made a child feel unwanted and worthless. Sometimes this situation will lead him to take on the role of the conciliator, the peace-maker between the parents, binding both parents to him in a desperate attempt to keep them with him and keep them together. These torments, too, are things that a child can be partially spared even when the conflict between parents is very deep. He may, indeed, be the one who insures the still remaining ties between the parents, but if his parents knowing this can avoid making him the center of their conflicts, they can relieve some of the pressures upon the child.

Then, too, there are some conflicts in marriage that are most intimately part of the marriage itself that somehow are displaced onto the children in quite unconscious ways. A husband who wanted desperately to save his marriage had consulted a family agency counselor. He was at war with his wife and at war with his children and he didn't know what came over him at times. He was sure he loved his children but at times he flew into a rage over the most trivial things and on several occasions had beaten his six year old daughter who was, he added in an afterthought,

his wife's favorite. His wife, he said, did not love him. They quarrelled bitterly over money, over the rearing of the children, over the interference of in-laws. Twice his wife had left him and had come back to him.

After many visits to the counselor the husband found he could speak of some things that were very painful to him. His wife was sexually cold. She found sex relations disgusting and avoided him sexually for weeks at a time. She never expressed tenderness toward him at any time; scarcely responded even to the kiss with which he greeted her when he came home from work. "When I see her with the kids, holding them and saying loving things to them I want to cry. How can she have so much love for them and nothing at all for me! I'm jealous of my own kids! Isn't that nuts! And Sally gets the worst of my feelings because she's her mother's favorite."

They would quarrel at night in bed, when the wife refused her husband. And the husband, rejected and raging inwardly, would waken the next morning in a black mood and sometime during that next day there would be a battle with his wife over money, or over the children, or the interference of in-laws and the whole cycle would begin again. Or sometimes the rage would unexpectedly vent itself upon the children, and the man who would never beat his wife, (who must have been tempted to and hastily buried the thought) found himself in a fury over some petty misdemeanor of the children and struck out at a cowering child, hating himself and not knowing why he was doing this.... Gradually, over many weeks, as he told his story and observed his own reactions, the husband made a discovery that astonished him. Many of the conflicts with his wife and children were continuations of the quarrels in the bedroom. Behind the quarrels over money was the unspoken reproach, "I give you everything; you give me nothing." And the silent accusation of the wife, "You can't

give me anything but money. There's not enough of anything in this house; not enough love, not enough money." Behind many of the quarrels over the children was another silent drama. "The children have taken you away from me. Before the children came you enjoyed being my wife. You give them everything and you give me nothing." And the unspoken defense of the wife was: "How can you accuse me of not being a good wife when I am such a good mother to the children. How can you expect me to enjoy sex relations with you when I've spent all day doing the housework and taking care of three children and I'm just too tired at night. All you think about is sex!"

For every person who seeks professional help for his personal problems there is a tremendous relief at discovering why he behaves in explicable ways. This distraught husband found such relief in the discovery that his quarrels with his wife and his rages against the children he loved were part of the unsolved problems of their sexual relationship. With only this much knowledge he found he no longer needed to discharge his fury on his children and engage in endless petty quarrels with his wife. Now that he knew for certain where the problem lay he also knew that both he and his wife needed help in working out their sexual conflicts. He was able to persuade his wife to seek help for herself and together they began to find solutions to their sexual conflicts and a new harmony in their marriage.

From this story we can see how unconsciously parents may take out their dissatisfactions in marriage on the children. One can easily think of other examples. The wife who finds her husband's stubbornness unbearable, at times, may find her two year old daughter "just like her father" and react to the characteristic stubbornness of the two year old just as if it were an inherited trait acquired through the

father. Clearly there's trouble ahead for mother and daughter, unless the mother can recognize that she is displacing feelings from her husband to her daughter and bring her irrational feelings under control. The wife who thinks her husband "thinks too much about sex" may become very disturbed when she discovers her little four year old son engaged in toilet games with the little girl next door and forget for the moment that such curiosity is normal among all children. The husband who thinks that his wife is extravagant may find himself policing his children's use of their allowances and engaged in argument with his school age youngsters over money in much the same way that he quarrels with his wife over money. The husband who resents his wife's managing ways may secretly enjoy his children's defiance of their mother and take little part in the discipline of his children. The anarchy that results may give him unconscious satisfaction.

Sometimes, just by taking a long look at himself and his behavior toward the children, a parent may discover that he is over-reacting to a trait in one of his children or that he is displacing feelings on to his children that do not belong to them but to dissatisfactions in his marriage. This self-knowledge can be an effective means to modification of one's behavior toward the children. But sometimes, too, the feelings are so tangled and the grievances are so deep that only professional help can bring new solutions.

In nearly every community there are agencies and clinics that provide professional counseling for marriage problems and parent-child relationships. The professional fees are scaled according to family income. When parents find that their own attempts to solve the problems of their marriage and their relationships with the children have failed, the chances are very good that professional help is needed. There are member agencies of the Family Service Association of America in communities throughout the country. The counselors in family agencies are in the most favorable position

to evaluate the problems that couples bring them, to know whether guidance can be best given through the family agency itself, or whether a mental hygiene clinic or psychiatric help is indicated.

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✓ While-we-can-all-agree-that

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In a family that is bound together by affection such differences are easily accommodated. And some differences in child rearing practices are certain to exist ~~in any family~~ if ^{Q.2} we consider that the two parents involved were each reared in families that very likely had their own styles of child rearing and most parents tend to rear their children along the same lines they had been reared themselves. Many parents discover that ~~with the growth of their families as~~ as the children ~~grew~~ develop and as their own marriage grows in depth and quality, their views on many subjects, including the rearing of the children come close together, each ~~borrowing~~ partner ~~borrowing and~~ consciously and ~~quite~~ unconsciously taking over some of the views of the other. ~~He~~ ~~that eventually~~ - In a marriage where there is fundamental harmony the long talks between parents after the children are in bed sometimes clear up some differences. "Don't you think you're being too tough-strict with Arthur on that broken window?" ~~he~~ says Arthur's mother to his father. "It'll take him weeks and weeks to pay for it out of his allowance." "Well, he has to learn a lesson. I remember a lesson like that when I was a kid, and I never forgot it." "Maybe you could have learned the lesson with one half of the ^{punishment} grief as well as with the whole load." "Do you really think I'm too tough on Arthur?" ~~Mar-~~

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This kind of exchange goes on between parents everywhere. And when there is love between the parents these candid discussions and honest criticisms of each other give each parent the opportunity to examine his own beliefs and practices and ^{2.3} modify them when necessary. But when there is deep conflict between parents such criticism may be taken as an attack and the ~~sub-~~ discussion of children and rearing may become the ~~area~~ starting point for bitter accusations.

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When the differences in child rearing practices between two parents also reflect the antagonisms between the two parents a child cannot easily reconcile ~~these~~ these differences within himself. ~~If we use as an example the too strict and too lenient--parent and the too lenient-parent--father who is too strict and the mother who is too lenient-~~ Since the child models his conscience after his parents, ~~takes his parents' standards-~~ and takes his parents discipline into

✓ his own personality, he sometimes emerges finds himself with two warring ~~die~~-parents imbedded in his own conscience. The ~~strict-father-~~ sometimes still too strict father and the too lenient mother are ~~are~~ still fighting for supremacy in the dark reaches of conscience. I once knew a grown man who exhibited a pattern of behavior that puzzled everyone who knew him. He was a ~~stern and tough businessman~~ ^{well disciplined scientist} who drove himself mercilessly in his work. And periodically, ~~(always-following-some-disappointment)~~ he would disappear from his job- yet whenever he suffered disappointments he would lapse into ludicrous self-pity and complain to everyone ~~who~~ ~~could-be~~ he knew that he was not appreciated, that everyone took advantage of him, that he was lonely and unloved and that life was not worth living. His friends knew that at such times there was nothing better to do than to listen sympathetically, assure him of his worth, commiserate with him on the follies of mankind, and let him slowly pull himself together again. ~~Our friend had grown up in a family where two antagonistic parents had imposed their brought their incompatible views into-~~ This contrast in personality between stern self-discipline and self-indulgence almost exactly reflected the ~~patterns-of-child-~~ personalities of our friends' parents. There was a strict, iron-willed father, much ^{feared and much loved} ~~loved and admired~~ by his son. There was a sad, gentle, self-pitying mother whose love centered on her son, ~~and who protected him against the indulged the boy-~~ protected the boy against his stern father, ~~indulged--was-a-haven-~~ consoled him with lavish affection for all small hurts and indulged ~~his-whims-~~ him on every score to make up for the strictness of the father. The warring parents were ^{P. 4} taken over into the child's ~~consciousness~~ conscience in the form of strict self-discipline alternating with self-pity

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But if two ~~unhappy~~ parents who have not yet solved their marriage problems can be aware of the effects upon their children it may be possible to avoid visiting some of these problems on their children. The mother who fully understands the emotional needs of her son may be able to avoid the temptation to lavish her love on her ~~young~~ son and allow him to take his father's place. She will also employ her wisdom to ~~support~~ the boy's relationship to his father and to help ~~him~~ achieve a positive identification with his father, and ~~keep-her-personal-~~ as far as possible keep her personal ~~antagonisms-~~ conflicts with the child's father from interfering with the relationship

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Or consider the case of the child who finds himself in the midst of open conflict between the parents. He may be the witness of violent parental quarrels in which one or the other of the parents threatens to leave. "I used to lie in bed and tremble when I heard them quarrel," a grown man told a social worker in a family age-counselling agency. "I was afraid they were going to get a divorce. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. I knew a boy who lived in an orphanage and I thought that's what will happen^{to} to me!" There is no greater terror in all of childhood than the fear of abandonment by his loved parents. What else can a child make of his parents' quarrels and threats? Of he may hear ~~in-their-arguments-that-if-the-parents-will-get-a-diversee-he-~~ his parents argue as to ~~whom-~~ which parent will get the children in the event of divorce. ~~How-can-a-child-~~ And the child, wanting both parents^{7.6} and loving and needing both, cannot feels as if he were being cut in two. Parents in conflict who have wisdom about their children and their feelings will spare the children from witnessing or overhearing such violent quarrels. It is enough for the children to bear the burden of their knowledge that all is not right between their parents. ~~We~~ They can be spared terror and helplessness and the spectacle of two adults out of control.

Sometimes, too, a child acquires the bitter knowledge that he is the only reason his parents are staying together. He may come to believe with his child's wisdom that somehow his very existence has created

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a problem for his parents and feel, uncertainly, that he is somehow to blame, just in having been born. I have known such ~~path-~~ children and have seen how sometimes this has made a child feel ~~worth-~~ unwanted and worthless, ~~and~~ Sometimes ^{this situation} will lead him to take on the desperate role of the conciliator, the peace-maker between the parents, ~~de~~ binding both parents to him in a desperate attempt to keep them with him and keep them together. These torments, too, are things that ~~This, too, is something that~~ a child can be spared-even-in partially spared even when the conflict between parents is very deep. He may, indeed, be the ~~only-reason~~ one who ^{insures} keeps the still remaining ties between the parents, but if his parents ~~de-not~~ knowing this can ~~still~~ avoid making him the center of their conflicts, even-the-painful-knowledge-of-the-child they can relieve some of the pressures upon the child.

Then, too, there are some conflicts in marriage that are most intimately part of the marriage itself that somehow are displaced onto the children in quite unconscious ways. A husband who wanted desperately to save his marriage had consulted a ~~guidance-social~~ family agency counsellor. He was at war with his wife and at war with his children and he didn't know what came over him at times. He was sure he loved his children but at times ~~but-at-times~~ he flew into a rage over ~~their-~~ ~~em-~~ the most trivial things and on several occasions had beaten his six year old daughter who was, he added in an afterthought, ^{P. 7} his wife's favorite. His wife, he said, did not love him. They quarrelled bitterly over money, over the rearing of the children, over the interference of ~~related-~~ in-laws. Twice his wife had left him and had come back to him. ~~After~~ After many visits to the counsellor the husband found he could

✓ speak of some things that were very painful to him. His wife was sexually cold. She found sex relations ~~revelling~~ disgusting and avoided him sexually for weeks at a time. ~~She-was-cold-to-his-~~ She never expressed tenderness toward him at any time; scarcely responded even to the kiss with which he greeted ~~him~~ when he came home from work. "When I see her with the kids, holding them and ~~fe~~ ~~crooning to them~~ and saying loving things to them I want to cry. How can she have so much love for them and nothing at all for me! I'm jealous of my own kids! Isn't that nuts! ~~Sometimes-I-hate-them~~ And Sally gets the worst of my feelings because she's her mother's favorite." ~~TH~~ They would quarrel at night in bed, ~~the-husband-having-been-refused-~~ when the wife refused her husband. And the husband, ~~helpless-and-enraged-would-find-~~ rejected and ~~raging inwardly~~ ~~fueled~~ at rejection once again, would waken the next morning in a black mood and sometime during that/^{next} day there would be a battle with his wife over money, or over the children, or the interference of in-laws and the whole cycle would begin again. Or sometimes the rage would unexpectedly vent itself upon the children, and the man who would never beat his wife, (who must have been tempted to and ~~hastily~~ buried the thought,) found himself in a fury over some petty misdemeanor of the children and ~~hating-himself-and-~~ struck out at a cowering child, hating himself and not knowing why he was doing this.... Gradually, over many weeks, as he told his story and observed his own reactions, the husband made a discovery that astonished ~~him~~. Many of the conflicts with his wife and his children ~~had-their-origins-in-the-conflicts-of-the-~~ ~~be~~ were continuations of the quarrels in the bedroom. Behind the quarrels over money was the unspoken reproach, "I give you everything; you give me nothing." And the silent accusation of the wife, "You can't ^{P. 8} give me anything but money. ~~Since you can't give~~

✓ ~~me-what-I-want-~~ There's not enough of anything in this house; not enough love, not enough money." Behind ~~that-~~ many of the quarrels over the children was another silent drama. "The children have taken you away from me. Before the children came you enjoyed being my wife. You give them everything and you give me nothing." And the unspoken defense of the wife was: "How can you accuse me of not being a good wife when I am such a good mother to the children. How can you expect me to enjoy sex relations with you when I've spent all day doing the housework and taking care of three children and I'm just too tired at night. All you think about is sex!"

For every person who seeks ^{professional} help ~~with-his-~~ for his personal problems there is a tremendous relief at discovering why he behaves in explicable ways. ^{this} Our distraught husband found such relief in the discovery that his quarrels ~~and-his-rages-~~ with his wife and his rages against the children he loved were part of the unsolved problems of ^{their actual relationship} ~~the bedroom~~. With only this much knowledge he found he no longer needed to discharge his fury on his children and engage in endless petty quarrels with his wife. ~~If~~ Now that he knew for certain where the problem lay he also knew that both he and his wife needed help in working out their sexual conflicts. He was able to persuade his wife to seek help for herself and together ~~and with help~~ they began to find solutions to ~~the-se-~~ their sexual conflicts and a new harmony in their marriage.

From this story we can see how unconsciously parents may take out their dissatisfactions in marriage on the children. One can easily think of other examples, ~~outside of the realm of sexual relations~~. Consider, for example, The mother- wife who finds her husband's stubbornness unbearable, at times, may find her two year old daughter

✓ "just like her father" and react ~~et~~ to the characteristic stubbornness of the two year old just as if it were an inherited trait acquired through the ^{P. 9} father. Clearly there's trouble ahead for mother and daughter, unless the mother can recognize that she is displacing feelings from her husband to her daughter and bring her irrational feelings under control. The wife who thinks her husband "thinks too much about sex" may become very disturbed when she discovers her little four year old son engaged in toilet games with ^{the} a little girl next door and forget for the moment that such curiosity is normal among all children. The husband who thinks that his wife is extravagant may find himself policing his children's use of their allowances and ~~find himself unable to educate his children~~ ^{and} engaged in argument with his school age youngsters over money in much the same way that he quarrels with his wife over money. The husband who ~~feels himself devalued as a man--that his wife devalues him as a man--may find himself pressing his young son~~ resents his wife's managing ways may secretly enjoy his children's defiance of their mother and take little ~~interest in~~ part in the ~~children's~~ discipline of ~~ehis~~ children. The anarchy that results may give him unconscious satisfaction.

Thi- Sometimes, just by taking a long look at ^{himself} ~~oneself~~ and ^{his} ~~one's~~ behavior toward the children, a parent may discover that he is over-reacting to a trait in one of his children or that he is displacing feelings on ^{to} his children that do not belong to them but to dissatisfactions in his marriage. This self-knowledge can be an effective ~~deterrent-~~ ~~semeti-~~ means to modification of one's ~~attitude~~ behavior toward the children. But sometimes, too, the feelings are so tangled and the grievances are so deep that only professional help can bring new

solutions.

✓ In nearly every community there are agencies and clinics that give provide ~~eeunsellihg-serviees-~~ professional counselling for marriage and ~~parent-child-~~ problems and parent-child relationships. ~~Nearly~~ always The professional fees are scaled according to family income. When parents find that ~~their~~ own attempts to solve the problems of their marriage and their relationships with the children have failed, the chances are very good that professional help is needed. There are member agencies of the Family Service Association of America in ~~nearly-~~ communities throughout the country. ~~Fa-~~ A-family-agency-may be- The counsellors in family agencies are in the most favorable position ^{7.10} to ~~eg-help~~ evaluate the problems that couples bring them, to know whether, ~~such-problems-can-be-effectively--helped-through-~~ the- guidance can be ~~given~~ best given through the family agency itself, or whether a ~~elinie-or-ether~~ mental hygiene clinic or psychiatric help is indicated.

January 1962

What Happens To Youngsters

WHEN PARENTS CLASH?

by Selma H. Fraiberg, a child psychotherapist
and author of the prize-winning book on early
childhood, "The Magic Years"

January 1962

MUST CONFLICT IN MARRIAGE
HARM THE CHILDREN?

by SELMA H. FRAIBERG

Author of "The Magic Years"

Should parents always be in agreement on methods of rearing their children? We'll admit that it's a lot easier on the children when parental views on child-rearing are in harmony, but in a happy family there may still be some differences between parents -- and these do not necessarily spell disaster for the personalities of the children.

Many adults can remember, comfortably, that in their childhood there were some things ~~that~~ you couldn't get away with if father ^{was} ~~was~~ around, yet these were things that mother might conveniently overlook. Sloppy table manners would bring a sermon from father and a threat to send someone away from the table. Mother, whose own standards had been eroded through years of mopping faces and floors, might discharge her obligation with an absent-minded reminder

to Susie that it was really time for a six-year-old girl to use her fork.

But mother couldn't stand "fibbing," as she called it, and was very severe with the culprit who told tall tales. Father, didn't see why she was so upset because this was "just a phase that all children go through". Father favored brief punishments in which the culprit felt his anger. Mother contained her anger (although her frown was terrible) and favored banishment of the culprit to his room or the deprivation of privileges. Mother and father appeared to accept these differences in each other in an amiable kind of way and the children did, too.

In a family that is bound together by affection, such differences are easily accommodated. Moreover, many parents discover that as the children develop and as their own marriage grows in depth and quality, their views on many subjects--including the rearing of the children--come closer together, each partner consciously and uncon-

sciously taking over some of the views of the other.

In a marriage where there is fundamental harmony, the long talks between parents after the children are in bed sometimes clear up some differences.

"Don't you think you're being too strict with Arthur on that broken window?" says Arthur's mother to his father. "It'll take him weeks and weeks to pay for it out of his allowance."

"Well, he has to learn a lesson. I remember a lesson like that when I was a kid, and I never forgot it."

"Maybe you could have learned the lesson with one half of the punishment as well as with the whole load."

"Do you really think I'm too tough on Arthur?"

"Sometimes. He's a pretty good kid, and he was already broken hearted about the window."

This kind of exchange goes on between parents everywhere. And when there is love between the parents these candid discussions and honest criticisms

restore
text

of each other give each parent the opportunity to examine his own beliefs and practices and modify them when necessary. But when there is deep conflict between parents, such criticisms may be taken as an attack, and the discussion of child rearing may become the starting point for bitter accusations.

Just as children are involved in parental love, children can be involved in conflicts between the parents. When the differences in child rearing practices between two parents also reflect *basic*

~~the antagonisms between the two parents,~~

a child cannot easily ~~reconcile these~~

~~differences within himself.~~ *adapt to these opposing strains.*

Since the child models his conscience after his parents, and takes his parents' discipline into his own personality, he sometimes finds himself with two warring parents imbedded in his own conscience. The too strict father and the too lenient mother are sometimes still fighting for supremacy in the dark reaches of conscience.

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I once knew a grown man who exhibited a pattern of behavior that puzzled everyone who knew him. He was a disciplined scientist who drove himself mercilessly in his work. And yet, whenever he suffered disappointments he would lapse into ludicrous self-pity and complain to everyone he ~~knew~~ that he was not appreciated, that everyone took advantage of him, that he was lonely and unloved and that life was not worth living. His friends knew that at such times there was nothing better to do than to listen sympathetically, assure him of his worth, commiserate with him on the follies of mankind, and let him slowly pull himself together again.

This contrast in personality between stern self-discipline and self-indulgence, almost exactly reflected the personalities of our friend's parents. There was a strict, iron-willed father, much feared and much loved by his son. There was a sad, gentle, self-pitying mother whose love centered on her son, who protected the boy against his stern

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father, consoled him with lavish affection for all small hurts and indulged him on every score to make up for the strictness of the father. The warring parents were taken over into the child's conscience in the form of strict self-discipline, alternating with self-pity and self-indulgence, in this strikingly ~~incongruous~~ way. And just as the differences between the two parents could never be ^{re}conciliated, the two factions of conscience could not be brought into harmony.

But where there are differences between parents who are not basically antagonistic to each other, it seems that children need not suffer internal conflict. For we know that not all children whose parents have had conflicts in marriage, have grown up with distortions of personality. Certainly, we all know children who have grown up in the midst of marital conflict who have come through with a minimum of scars; who have later created good

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marriages and have become happy and successful parents themselves. So it seems to me that we need to find out under what circumstances marital conflict will create serious difficulties in children, and by what means these disturbances can be avoided or kept to a minimum.

Suppose, for example, that a mother who is disappointed in her husband and feels unloved and rejected should invest all her unspent love on her little son. A little boy who must make up to his mother for his father's failures as a husband, is a boy who bears an intolerable burden. Every little boy likes to imagine that he can have all his mother's love for himself, and he likes to pretend that he is a daddy and can take his father's place. And every little boy needs to give up this day-dream in the course of his early years in order one day to fully love a woman and become a husband and father in his own right. But when a boy can live this day-dream with his mother,

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when he is allowed to take his father's place, then his emotional development and his capacity for mature love will suffer. Further, the little boy must inevitably feel guilty in relation to his father, for having taken the father's place in his mother's affections. The whole relationship among child, ^{and} mother and father becomes distorted. In such circumstances, the child is drawn into his parents' conflicts in a way that may damage his future.

But if two parents who have not yet solved their marriage problems can be aware of the effects on their children of their own feelings and behavior, it may be possible to avoid visiting some of these problems on their children. The mother who understands the emotional needs of her son, may be able to avoid the temptation to lavish her love on her son and allow him to take his father's place. She will ~~also~~ employ her wisdom ^{with} to support the boy's relationship ^{and} to help the child ^{to} help the child

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achieve a positive identification with *him*,
~~his father, and~~ she will try to keep
her ~~personal~~ conflicts with her husband from interfering with the relationship between son and father. In such a case, though the conflict between the parents may remain unsolved, parents' sensitivities to a child's needs will keep the conflict from crippling his development.

But consider the case of the child who finds himself in the midst of open conflict between the parents. He may be the witness of violent parental quarrels in which one or the other *of his* parents threatens to leave. "I used to lie in bed and tremble when I heard them quarrel," a grown man told a social worker in a family counseling agency. "I was afraid they were going to get a divorce. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. I knew a boy who lived in an orphanage and I thought that's what *would* happen to me!" There is no greater terror in all of child-

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hood than the fear of abandonment, ~~by~~
~~his loved parents~~. Or a child may
hear his parents argue as to which
parent will get the children in the
event of divorce. And the child,
~~wanting both~~ parents ~~and~~ loving and
needing both, feels as if he were
being cut in two. Parents in conflict,
who have wisdom about their children's
~~and their~~ feelings, will spare them
~~children~~ from witnessing or overhear-
ing such violent quarrels. It is
enough for the children to bear the
burden of ~~their~~ knowledge that all
is not right between their parents.
They can be spared terror and help-
lessness and the spectacle of two
adults out of control.

Sometimes, too, a child acquires the
bitter knowledge that he is the only
reason his parents are staying to-
gether. He may come to believe, with
his child's wisdom, that somehow his
very existence has created a problem
for his parents, and he may feel that
he is somehow to blame, just for
having been born. I have known such

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children, and have seen how this can make a child feel unwanted and worthless. Sometimes a child will try to take on the role of the conciliator, the peace-maker, between the parents, binding both parents to him in a desperate attempt to keep them both with him. These torments, too, are things that a child can be partially spared, even when the conflict between parents is very deep. He may, indeed, be the one who insures the still remaining ties between the parents, but if his parents--realizing this--can avoid making him the center of their conflicts, they can relieve some of the pressures ^{him} ~~upon the child~~.

Then, too, there are some conflicts in marriage which are most intimately part of the marriage itself, and that somehow become displaced onto the children in quite unconscious ways. A husband who wanted desperately to save his marriage had consulted a family agency counselor. He was at war with his wife and at war with his children,

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and he didn't know what came over him at times. He was sure he loved his children, but at times he flew into a rage over the most trivial things and on several occasions had beaten his six-year-old daughter who was, he added in an afterthought, his wife's favorite. His wife, he said, did not love him. They quarrelled bitterly over money, over the rearing of the children, over the interference of in-laws. Twice his wife had left him and had come back to him.

After many visits to the counselor the husband found that he could speak of some things that were very painful to him. His wife was sexually cold. She found sex relations disgusting. She never expressed tenderness toward her husband at any time, scarcely responded even to the kiss with which he greeted her when he came home from work. "When I see her with the kids, holding them and saying loving things

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to them I want to cry. How can she have so much love for them and nothing at all for me? I'm jealous of my own kids! Isn't that nuts? And Sally gets the worst of my feelings because she's her mother's favorite."

The husband and wife would quarrel at night in bed. And the husband, rejected, and raging inwardly, would waken the next morning in a black mood and sometime during that next day there would be a battle with his wife over money, or over the children, or the interference of in-laws, and the whole cycle would begin again. Or sometimes the rage would unexpectedly vent itself upon the children, and the man who would never beat his wife (he must have been tempted and hastily buried the thought), found himself in a fury over some petty misdemeanor of the children and struck out at a cowering child, hating himself and not knowing why he was doing it.

Gradually, over many weeks, as he

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told his story and observed his own reactions, the husband made a discovery that astonished him. Many of the conflicts with his wife and children were continuations of the quarrels in the bedroom. Beyond the quarrels over money was the unspoken reproach, "I give you everything; you give me nothing." And the silent counter-accusation of his wife was--"You can't give me anything but money. There's not enough of anything in this house; not enough love, not enough money." # Behind many of the quarrels over the children was another silent drama. "The children have taken you away from me. Before the children came you enjoyed being my wife. You give them everything and you give me nothing." And the unspoken defense of the wife was: "How can you accuse me of not being a good wife when I am such a good mother to the children. All you think about is sex, but when I've spent all day doing the housework and taking care of four children, I'm just too tired at night.

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For every person who seeks professional help for his personal problems, there is a tremendous relief at discovering why he behaves in explicable ways. This distraught husband found such relief in the discovery that his quarrels with his wife and his rages against the children he loved, were part of the unsolved marital problems between him and his wife. With only this much knowledge, he found he no longer needed to discharge his fury on his children and engage in endless petty quarrels with his wife. Now he knew what the problem was, he also knew that both he and his wife needed help in working out their sexual conflicts. He was able to persuade his wife to seek help for herself, and together they began to find solutions to their conflicts and a new harmony in their marriage.

From this story, we can see how parents may unconsciously take out their dissatisfactions in marriage on

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the children. ^H Or take the example of the wife who finds her husband's stubbornness unbearable. At times, she may find her two year old daughter "just like her father," and react to the characteristic stubbornness of the two-year-old just as if it were ^{special} a trait inherited from the father. Clearly there's trouble ahead for mother and daughter, unless the mother--recognizing that she is displacing feelings about her husband to her daughter--can bring her irrational feelings under control.

^A ~~The~~ wife who feels that her husband "thinks too much about sex," may become very disturbed when she discovers her four-year-old son engaged in toilet games with the little girl next door, forgetting that such curiosity is normal among all children. ^A The husband who thinks that his wife is extravagant may find himself policing his children's use of their allowances, and engaged in argument with his school age youngsters over money in much the

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same way that he quarrels with his wife.

Sometimes, just by taking a long look at himself and his behavior toward the children, a parent may discover that he is over-reacting to a trait in one of his children, or that he is displacing ²grievances on to his children that really stem from dissatisfactions in his marriage. This self-knowledge can be an effective means to modification of ~~one's~~ behavior toward the children. But sometimes ~~the~~ the feelings are so tangled and the grievances ~~are~~ so deep, that only professional help can bring new solutions.

In many communities, there are agencies and clinics that provide professional counseling for marriage problems and parent-child relationships. The professional fees are scaled according to family income. When parents find that their own attempts to solve the problems of their marriage and their relationships with the children have failed,

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it may be that professional help is needed. There are member agencies of the Family Service Association of America in communities throughout the country. The counselors in family agencies are in the most favorable position to evaluate the problems that couples bring them, to know whether guidance can be best given through the family agency itself, or whether a mental hygiene clinic or psychiatric help is indicated.