

Dear Susan:

My husband says that I make him the heavy by wanting to wait until he gets home to handle serious discipline problems. I want him to share the responsibility with me and not make me the heavy by my having to do it without him. What should I do?

This is a common problem. Children need to be parented by two parents who are a team. In the absence of the other parent, the open spot may be filled by a grandparent, a housekeeper, or even another child in the family. The latter causes problems because it elevates a child to an inappropriate adult role. The former two may work if there is no father at all or no mother. But whatever two adults are parenting, there must be togetherness.

When mom is with the kids and dad is gone either physically because of travel or emotionally, it is important to make his presence felt at home when he isn't there. If he is gone emotionally, he needs to become involved. If gone physically, calls home on a daily basis to mom and the kids are important.

To involve your husband and resolve the parenting split, sit down nightly with him at a time negotiated by both of you. Fill him in on the children's activities, successes, and problems. Hear his concerns. Then discuss the issues of discipline and decide mutually how to handle such incidents when they arise. Follow through by having a family meeting with your children to let them know jointly how problem areas will be handled. Then, when you are present and the problem arises, follow through on what you and your husband have agreed. Don't change the plan without checking with your partner first. Have regular weekly family meetings to voice your concerns and plans of action, to hear the kids' concerns, and to plan family activities together.

If negotiating on parenting decisions is difficult for you and your husband, plan to go to a busy restaurant. Sit in a quiet corner and discuss how each of you grew up and what it is about the current situations that distress you. Discuss what you want to replicate from your childhood and what you want to avoid. Take turns doing this. Then negotiate the present. It is common for people who grew up with abuse or authority to protect their children, sometimes too much. Such backgrounds may make you too tough yourselves as well as not tough enough. Rudolph Dreikurs' Children The Challenge is an excellent book for helping parents learn how to use logical consequences instead of being the instrument of punishment for their children.