

## **Split-Parent Family Values**

by Andrew Stenhouse

On their way to a soccer game, Tom stopped by his ex-wife's house so his son could run in and grab a clean jersey. Running late, Ryan thought nothing of storming into the house while his dad waited in the car in the driveway. A single divorcee, Ryan's mom was usually at work this time on Saturdays. Unfortunately, she wasn't at work that day — nor was she alone.

A nervous 12-year-old returned to the car with many questions. Tom didn't have the answers. He tried explaining that he and his ex-wife lived different lives with different values, but he felt his comments came up short.

As Tom shared his story with me, he was confused, angry and scared.

“I have to admit,” he confessed, “the Lord was hardly the center of our home when we were married. We rarely went to church and when we did, it was for some special occasion.”

Now, Tom is a faithful believer who wants his son to share his faith. “I'm trying to help Ryan learn from my mistakes, even as his mom keeps making them. It's strange, but raising my son seems harder now that I'm a Christian.”

I understood Tom's frustration but encouraged him not to give up. I reminded him that he was expecting a lot to think that his former spouse would have experienced the same spiritual transformation when he did.

### **The mission**

In split-parent family homes (homes where each parent shares custody after a separation or divorce), it is troublesome when former spouses do not share the same values. So how can you help your children shape a healthy value system when they live in two separate homes? To begin, it might be helpful to consider with them what your attitudes and behaviors are and how they reflect your values in life.

Ask them to list their top five values while you do the same. Don't show them your list until they are done. This could be a wonderful time to build your relationship, so don't rush the discussion.

If you see a contradiction between a value and an attitude or behavior in your child's life, be gentle as you communicate your thoughts. It might be helpful to share any difficulties you have had in living out a value you professed. Remind them that it's not unusual to slip up or make mistakes, but that living out their values is worth the effort and concentration that it will take. From here, help your kids compile a complete Code of Values to

which they might aspire. Print the list on nice paper and frame two copies, one for each home.

Encourage your kids to ask their other parent to help them live up to their Code of Values. If you are confronted about the values code by the other parent, emphasize that your kids chose their own standards and not yours alone. Most parents are likely to support their kids when aspiring for higher standards, especially when behavior improves. While it's the behaviors we appreciate, the values do the shaping. A sample Code of Values might be:

VALUE: ***Faith***

ATTITUDE: I love the Lord and look for ways to know Him more.

BEHAVIOR: Attend church, read Bible and pray

VALUE: ***Generosity***

ATTITUDE: I help others who cannot help themselves.

BEHAVIOR: Give time, money and service to others  
(Share my snacks and play with lonely kids at recess)

VALUE: ***Education***

ATTITUDE: I value learning as an opportunity to grow.

BEHAVIOR: Read and finish homework

VALUE: ***Respect***

ATTITUDE: I honor others by showing love and respect.

BEHAVIOR: Quarrel less and encourage (say nice things about) others more

VALUE: ***Safety***

ATTITUDE: I keep my home a safe place.

**BEHAVIOR:** Behave appropriately indoors (Save roughhousing for my bedroom, and never walk to a friends' house without telling my mom or dad)

### **The challenge**

Keep in mind that your kids watch your behavior to formulate their own values. While mistakes occur, blatantly conflicting behaviors can be confusing as one parent may profess one set of values while his or her lifestyle reflects another. This incongruence, according to psychologists, is the source of sadness and frustration for many people. The true mark of a person's value system, ultimately, is the person's behavior.

“By their fruit you will recognize them. . . . Every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit.” (Matthew 7:16-18).

“For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him” (Matthew 12: 34-35).

Remember that the focus of split-parenting is not a former spouse. It's your children. Don't compete as to who is the better parent or fall into the trap of false superiority that feeds your own need to feel better about your parenting.

We often feel so guilty about the divorce that anytime we can feel we are being a good parent (by being better than your ex), we enjoy it. This self-righteous attitude will only lead to division and conflict. Instead of focusing on the values of the other parent, focus on the values of your kids.

As you guide your kids, remember that spending time with other Christians is crucial. Socializing with Christian families allows your kids to experience the Christian home as the common standard. Christian community reinforces Christian values. This same community can also pray for us.

Defining a code of values for our children will help them to live for what they believe. Once they have that definition on paper, if they see behavior (in their other home) that's not consistent, they'll be able to understand that it's wrong and hopefully make a different choice for themselves. Granted, it may take some time to develop that code, but it is well worth the effort. Remember that we are fighting to build life-changing values in the hearts of our kids.

*Andrew Stenhouse helps his children stand for truth in Costa Mesa, Calif.*

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