

When Parents Disagree About Religion

One of the main reasons children are not enrolled in a regular religious education program is a conflict between parents about religion. This is a serious challenge in the best of circumstances.

In some families, parents have different faith traditions and disagree over which church children should be raised in. In others, parents share the same faith tradition, but have different levels of attachment to church (one parent may be very active, while the other is not). In some families, separation, divorce or remarriage may result in different church affiliations or different levels of church participation.

In some cases, one or both parents remain active in the church despite their differences. In many cases, however, both parents become increasingly indifferent and less active in any church. To prevent conflict, parents avoid the issue of church affiliation or participation altogether. In these families, children have no church affiliation at all.

American society generally models this "hands-off" approach. To prevent conflict between numerous religious traditions, Americans tend to avoid public discussion of religious issues and to limit any role for religion in public affairs.

The separation of faith from public life has serious repercussions for our society. It is difficult to determine and uphold common social values or shared moral standards without some reference to faith in something or Someone bigger than ourselves. Without a common, faith-based foundation, people think that social and moral values are arbitrarily created or chosen for political convenience; individuals assume they are free to voluntarily accept or reject those values.

In a family, the absence of active participation

in a church community leaves children without a faith-based foundation during a crucial time in their personal development. During the childhood years, children should be learning fundamental convictions about human life as well as basic moral values. If they learn these without reference to a faith-based tradition, they may assume that these convictions and values have been arbitrarily chosen by their parents. The absence of active participation in a church community leaves children without the example and support of other individuals, young and old, who recognize and uphold these fundamental religious beliefs and common moral values.

If you and your partner have chosen to avoid or reject church affiliation because of different faith traditions or conflicting attitudes about church participation, you should seriously reconsider the impact which this choice is having on your children.

To begin, review these options for parents who disagree about church affiliation or church participation:

Option One: Non-Participation. This is a common "default" option, particularly for parents who have strong differences or parents who are not strongly committed to any faith tradition.

Although doing nothing minimizes conflicts about religion, it leaves children with no faith-based tradition or moral foundation during a critical time in their personal development.

Parents sometimes assume that children raised in no faith tradition will therefore be free to choose their own when they are old enough to care, but it is unlikely that they will care one way or the other if they have had little or no exposure to

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any religious tradition. In many cases, children raised outside of a faith tradition model their parent's religious indifference as adults.

Religious indifference may also endanger the parents' marriage. A marriage in which one partner is inactive has only half the chance of survival of a marriage in which both partners are active, even when they are active in different churches.

Option Two: Joint-Participation. This option is sometimes chosen by parents who both take their own faith traditions seriously and want to share as much as they can with their children.

In effect, these parents try to raise their children in two religious traditions at the same time. Children often alternate attendance, or attend both parents' churches. Parents encourage children to see the good points about both traditions, and hope that, in time, children will choose for themselves which tradition they prefer.

In some ways this option reduces conflict between the parents, but it may leave children feeling more conflicted. Dual expectations can be an unrealistic burden, and differences between the churches often confuse children.

Studies show that many children raised in dual-tradition families don't attach to one or the other and are more likely to reject both. Like children raised in families with no religious affiliation, they end up indifferent and inactive as adults.

Option Three: Shared-Participation.

This option works well, particularly when one parent feels more strongly than the other about

his or her church affiliation, or when parents want to minimize conflicts for the children. It is the one recommended by most church professionals.

In this option, parents choose one or the other of the parents' faith traditions as the "primary" church affiliation for their children. At home, children are exposed to the customs, rituals, and prayers of both parents; they are exposed to what the two traditions share in common; and they may also occasionally participate in activities at the other parent's church. However, it is always clear that the children are being raised in one faith tradition, even though they may choose the other when they become adults.

This option requires a higher degree of cooperation between parents. Often, one parent will have to sacrifice more than the other. Without constant effort and understanding it may produce more conflict. In the long run, however, this option may produce the best results for children.

Differences about religion do not need to be divisive; conflict does not need to be destructive. Different faith traditions or levels of attachment to church can be positive if they are approached in a constructive way.

Success depends upon cooperation and patience, the determination to respect the other person and their religious convictions (or lack of conviction), an ability to identify deeper, fundamental similarities and common values, and a willingness to let friends, family and pastoral workers help you work through the differences.

--Dave Cushing

Tips for Parents ... What You Can Do

Even if your spouse doesn't share your religious commitment, you can do many things to plant the seeds of faith in your children:

1. Do what you can on your own.

Speak to them individually about your faith... read the Bible and Christian stories...teach them to pray...pray privately with them... set an example of faith by how you act.

2. Ask your spouse to cooperate.

Invite him/her to share religious or family customs...join in family prayer...participate in special activities during Advent or Lent ...join the

family in Christian service projects.

3. Get as much help as you can.

Get involved in your parish...look for support from other parents...get your kids involved in church activities...ask for help from the parish staff...see a counselor if the conflict gets hostile.

4. Don't think that you are alone.

Count on the Holy Spirit to guide you...here's one partner able and willing to help!

*Adapted from "When Daddy (or Mommy) Doesn't Go to Church" by Bert Ghezzi in **Guiltless Catholic Parenting** [Servant Publications, 1995].*