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Top Ten Tips for Helping Parents Keep Children Out of the Middle

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As significant a change as divorce is for children, ongoing conflict between parents can cause problems for children across a number of dimensions, including emotional development, social relationships and academic performance. All too often, even the best-intentioned parents act in ways that exacerbate tension and put the adult-sized weight of the divorce or separation onto the shoulders of children. Parents need to know how they can shield children from conflict while still listening to their concerns.

These practical tips are intended for family law professionals to provide to clients they represent as attorneys, see in mediation, help resolve disputes through parenting coordination and in mental health settings, both for parents and children.

1. Parents should model appropriate behavior for the child

Children constantly observe parental behavior. If a parent is terse, rude, will not make eye contact, or is otherwise disrespectful to the other parent, children notice and think that such behavior is normal or okay. Further, children identify with their parents. When it becomes obvious that Dad doesn't like Mom, a child is very likely to question if Dad likes them because the child likes Mom.

Even if it feels fake, making the effort to greet the other parent in a positive way, using good manners with them and avoiding a hostile or sarcastic tone, makes it comfortable for children to be in situations with both parents, such as at a school event or athletic activity.

Further, co-parenting does not end when the child turns 18. Graduations, weddings, grandchildren and other important events will likely involve both parents. Continuing conflict lessens the likelihood that both parents or either parent will be included in these important gatherings.

2. Parents should answer questions posed by the child in an engaged and empathetic way

Children need to be heard rather than interrogated about what they say. For example, when a child says, "I'm really tired," merely asking what time they went to bed may miss their need for comfort entirely. If a child states that he or she is

unhappy with a decision, such as why they cannot spend the night with a relative of the other parent, reflective or active listening helps the child feel heard and doesn't blame anyone. Examples include:

"Wow! That must be confusing. Let's talk about this."

"Why, what do you think?"

"I understand what you're saying, and your mother/father and I will talk about it and get back to you by __."

"You sound really upset about this. Let's sit down and talk about it."

Parents should demonstrate that they are listening to their children and are willing to help them with their confusion, fear, sadness and/or anger. It's always okay for the parent to ask the child whether there is anything they can do to help.

3. To question or not to question children

When parents don't get along well, they may think, "What goes on in my home stays in my home," and ask, directly or indirectly, that the children not talk about their time together. This teaches children to keep secrets, which may actually prevent them from telling parents about unsafe or frightening situations, such as something that occurs at a friend's home. A parent who asks questions such as, "What did you guys do over the weekend?" or "Where did you go to eat?" should not be seen as intrusive, but rather as encouraging the child to feel free to talk about every part of their life. When a child comes home from school, parents would never say, "What happens at school stays at school."

4. Parents must respond to the child's needs now, and their own needs later

Sometimes the child will ask a question or make a statement that pushes a button. The words "Mom/Dad said" are often triggers that remind a parent of the difficulties they experienced with the other parent. Your client may hear, "Dad says that you left us for another man" or "Mom told us you are behind in child support and that's why we can't go on vacation this year." It's important for parents to wear their "parent" hat at the time they are talking with the child, and appropriately respond to the child's question/statement (See Number 2, above). It may seem helpful to agree with the child, "I know what you mean. S/he used to do the same thing to me," but this would be putting the parent's needs before the child's. Instead, parents should react by using one of the examples in Number 2, above, and take care of their own needs later on, outside the presence of the child.

5. Using "we" messages implies cooperative co-parents

"We" messages show that the parents, although separated, are still a unified team. Parents can use these messages even when they think the co-parent isn't trying to protect the child from the adult disagreements. A statement such as, "I know you want to go on Spring Break with your friends, but I need to talk to your Mom/Dad about whether we think this is a good idea," models respectful and

appropriate decision-making. Parents should make sure children don't think they have to choose between the parents: "We're both going to be at your awards ceremony and you can sit with anyone you want. If you don't sit with me, I'll see you afterwards before I go home."

6. Parents should keep the children informed (schedule, activities, big decisions), but not too informed (financial circumstances, reasons behind the divorce, other adult issues)

When parents say, "I'm going to be honest with the children," this often forecasts sharing too much or inappropriate information with the children. There is a great deal of information parents don't share with children while they're married or living together. Keeping those same topics between the adults prevents unnecessarily burdening children and prevents them trying to figure out who is "right." Few parents share financial details with their children, such as whether they're worried about getting laid off. Telling children about financial matters worries them and typically results in them asking the other parent if the information is "true." Parents regularly promote positive myths like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy and don't worry about "being honest" in that context. Parents should ask themselves why they are thinking about sharing information now that they wouldn't have shared if the parents were still together.

7. Keep the responsibility for constructive communication with the parents

When children realize that there is no communication between parents they typically feel a need to fill the void. Similarly, children may begin to protect parents from hostile communication by taking on that role. There are numerous simple guides to constructive communication available to parents, such as "Biff"—Be Brief, Informative, Friendly and Firm.[1] Parents should consider themselves co-workers at Raising Our Children, Inc., and consider how they would react if they saw a colleague in the store, or at the child's ballgame. They would not be rude, dismissive, condescending, or otherwise belligerent, but rather would model good social behavior to the child. Telling clients to react as they would to anyone else rather than make a negative exception for the other parent can make a dramatic difference. Parents should remember that children are always watching, listening and remembering how their parents interact.

8. Pretend that any communications will be viewed/heard by the judge (or the children) someday

Communicated enmity between parents can cause emotional problems for children, and lead to legal ramifications if the parties' judicial officer becomes privy to disrespectful and uncooperative communications. A good rule of thumb is to assume *all* communications (in-person, over the phone, or text/email) can be viewed by people other than the other parent. There are very few circumstances that demand an immediate response, and many parents have lashed out at the other parent without stopping to consider the possible ramifications of their communication. Drafting an email or text and letting it sit for an hour or more will allow the sending parent to fully consider potential consequences of rude or

[1] www.billeddy.com.

disrespectful communications. Pretending that the child or the judicial officer is copied on any written communication reminds parents to be brief and respectful. Further, given that many parents allow children to use their smartphone or computer, the possibility that a child will actually view hostile or degrading communication between the parents can be very real.

9. Pay attention to who owns the problem

Parents sometimes react too quickly in telling a child the issue is "grown-up" business. When a child says, "Mom told me I have to ask you if I can go to Ryan's birthday party," telling the child, "Your mom should have talked to me about this," may leave the child feeling helpless in solving a simple problem. On the other hand, when a child says, "Dad says you're supposed to buy me new shoes," this appears to be a grown-up issue. Responding with reassurance that the parents will work this out helps kids get out from between the grown-ups. Sorting out whose problem it is can be tricky: Is this request one that the child would have made to either parent or does this sound like the child is reporting something the other parent wants? Will telling the child you will talk to the other parent leave them feeling stuck and as though there will never be a decision? Sometimes the best course is to answer the child's question or respond to the request even though the other parent should have spoken to you first. Parents sometimes say, "When I get paid next, we'll get a pair of shoes" to avoid the child waiting while the grown-ups discuss the issue.

10. Be careful about taking children's reports literally

There are a variety of reasons why children's statements and questions to their parents may be unreliable. Sometimes they do report exactly what they heard, but not everything the other parent said. Young children aren't good reporters of the context of events or statements. They may be accurately reporting the effect but not the cause: "Mommy pulled my arm and hurt me" may be true, but the child doesn't report that he was stuck in the grocery cart and Mommy was trying to help him get out. Older children often report the part of the conversation that fits with what they want: "Dad said I can go to the carnival with him" does not include the full statement, "You can go the carnival with me if that's our night together." Although it's hard to admit, sometimes children are manipulative to get what they want and purposely don't provide all of the information when they know a parent is likely to believe the worst of the other parent, such as, "Mom said you're paying for my class trip." A good response to such a statement is, "I understand; Mom and I will talk about it and you and I can discuss it afterwards."

Resources:

Eddy, B. (2005) *High Conflict People in Legal Disputes*. HCI Press.

Garber, B. (2008) *Keeping Kids Out Of The Middle*. Health Communications.

Ricci, I. (2006) *Mom's House/Dad's House*. Simon & Schuster

Ross, J. (1996) *Joint Custody with a Jerk*. St. Simon's Press