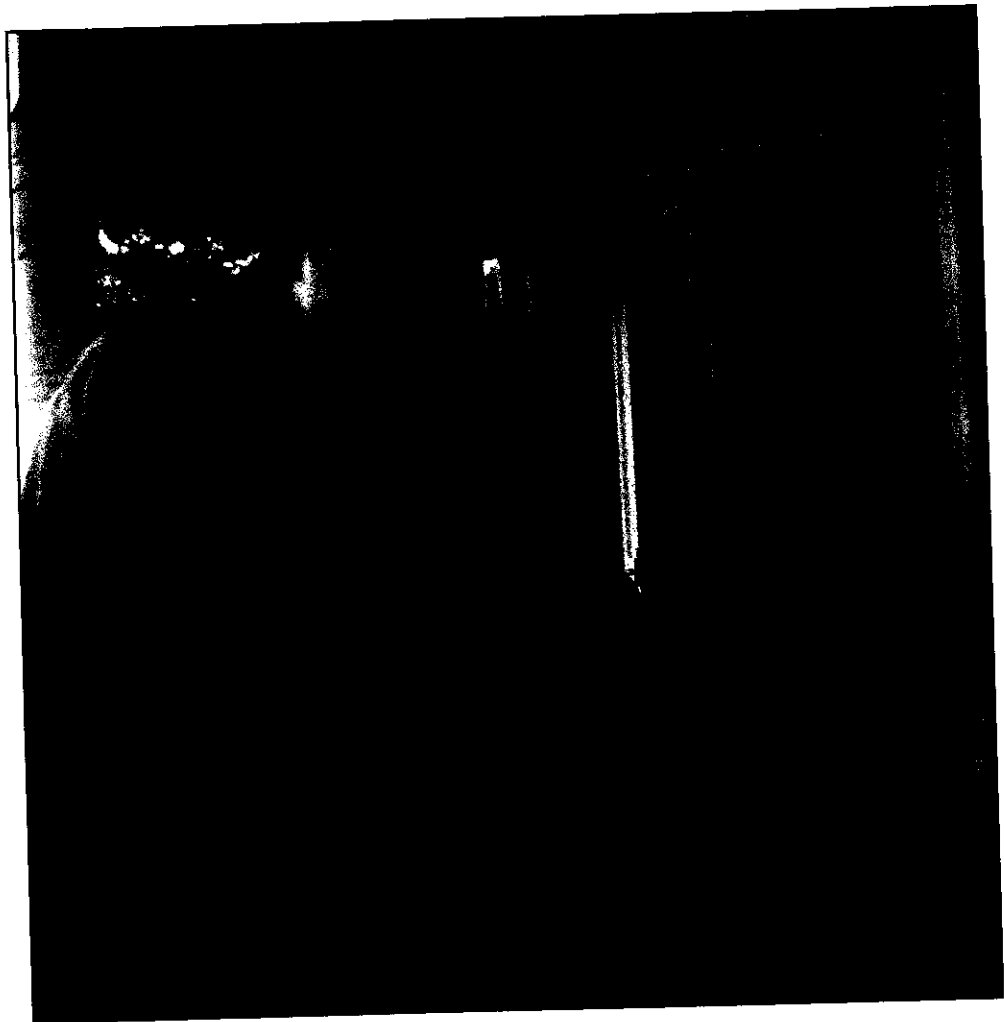


2.

Plan For Peace or Tug of War

Allowing My Child to Love Both Parents



Hopefully you have been increasing your awareness about how you put your child into the middle. This chapter will focus on the many ways children feel the stress of being caught in the middle. For example:

One of the most common and frequent occurrences is when **one parent criticizes the other**. Put-downs, criticisms, name-calling and even sighs and eye rolling force the child to side with one parent against the other. It's virtually impossible for the child to stay neutral for reasons we'll discuss later. For now, just remember: **Whenever you attack the other parent, you hurt your own child.**

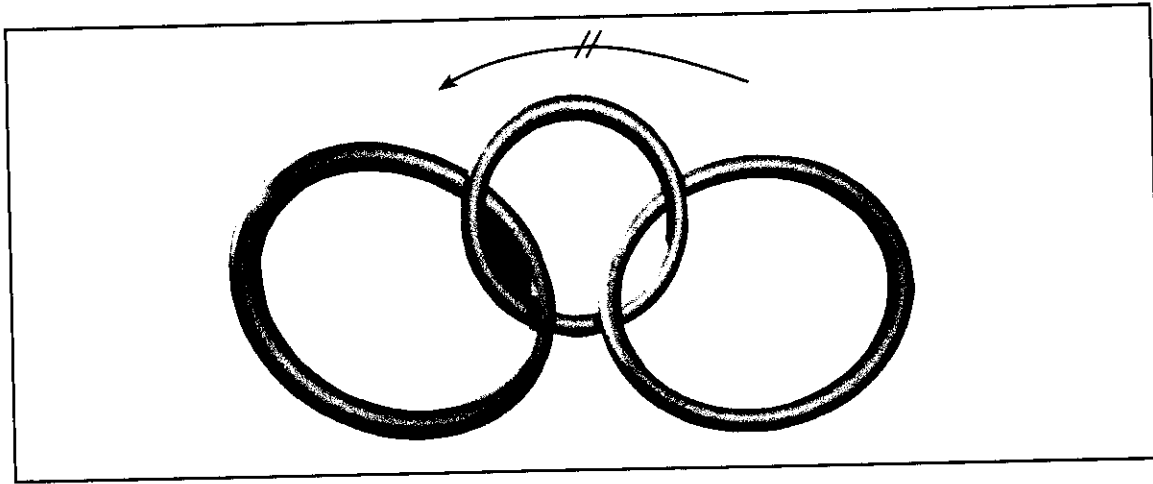
Another situation where the child is caught in the middle is when the child is asked to deliver a note, a message or the child-support check to the other parent. Once again, the child is put in the middle. If the message or note is likely to upset the parent receiving it, the child will usually be pulled into the fallout which results.

A third common situation which **forces the child to choose one parent over the other** is when the child has a activity that both he and his parents attend, such as a sporting event or school program. Should the child invite both parents, or will the stress of having both warring parties present be so great that the child feels forced to choose only one? The position of having to choose automatically puts the child in the middle.

Children also feel pushed to choose sides when one parent **plays the victim or "poor me" role**. This parent uses guilt to get the child to take her side of the disagreement. The child is put in the middle—between a parent who's a "winner" and one who's a "loser." The parent who talks about how sad he is, how lonely he feels when the child isn't there and how "I've lost everything" puts an incredibly heavy burden on the child. The child is being forced to side with the "victim" against the "winning" parent. The child not only feels hurt but tries to make the parent feel better. The "loser" parent is manipulating the child into fulfilling his own emotional needs. It isn't until later, when the child realizes that the "victim" manipulated her through guilt, that the child becomes resentful for being used in this manner. Although the child wants to freely love both parents, one parent uses the child's vulnerability to pull him in that parent's direction.

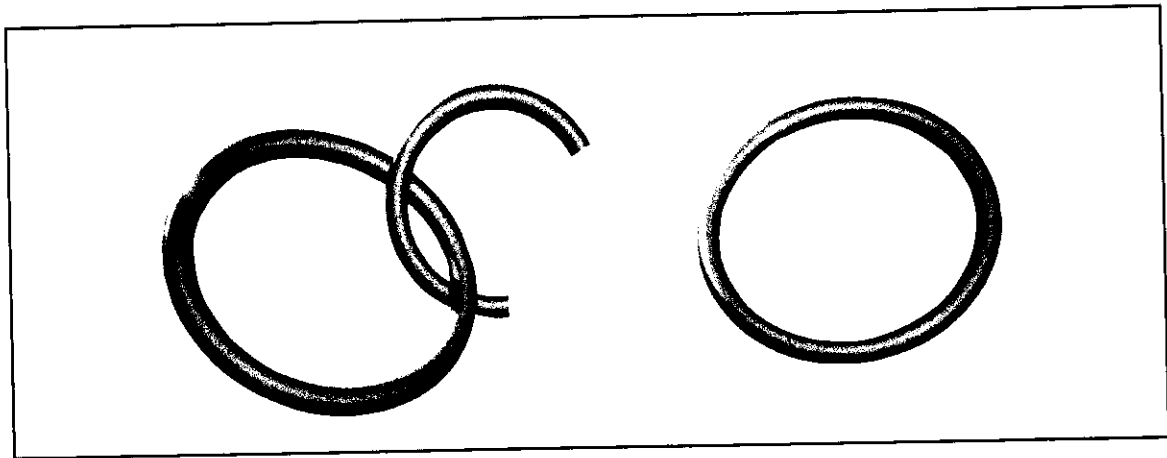
Another situation where the child is prevented from loving both parents is when **the parents concentrate too much on making things "equal."** When the child is forced to keep track of hugs, kisses, time, attention and material goods in order to equalize their distribution between the parents, he can't freely demonstrate the love he naturally feels. Every action has to be judged and measured and doled out in equal shares. He can't love both parents with his own free will.





You can imagine the result if the parent is not only “damaged” with criticism but is totally absent. The child feels like a piece of himself is missing too.

He grieves over the loss—not only the loss of the person but the loss of himself. He’s never quite complete because there’s a gaping hole where a part of him is missing.



What if There Were Only One Parent?

From the situations described above, you can see how painful the experience is for a child caught in the middle. You might even think about how much easier it would be if you were the only parent involved in the child’s life. Think of the advantages: You could eliminate some of your own stress and reduce the need to work out all these details with the child’s other parent. You’d have less conflict in your life and all the decisions about the child would be under your direct control.

Even though that scenario might meet your own personal needs, what would be the consequences for your child? Like the 23-year-old in the scenario at the beginning of this chapter who gives up his parents when he sides with his fiancée, the child would miss out on a lot. First, she would miss out on the love of one of the two people closest to her in her life. Secondly he would miss out on the shared memories of his early life which can be provided by only two individuals in the entire world. Third, he would lose out on the sense of value he receives from his important role in the generational process handed down from parent to child.



Through Your Child's Eyes

Now take a moment and look at your child's other parent through your child's eyes. What characteristics, qualities and skills do you see that your child might enjoy or admire? Does your child's other parent like to laugh and play silly games? Is she good at math and can help with homework, and later in life provide the child with sound financial advice? Is he creative, musical or a talented Leggo builder? Is she spontaneous, affectionate or organized? Does he enjoy board or computer games? What things would a child enjoy about this person either now or even sometime in the future when the child is in a different stage in life?

Remember you may think making cookies in the kitchen makes a huge mess but your child may think the mess is the best part. If you're an organized planner and your child is a free spirit, your child's other parent might provide a more relaxed environment for your child, while you might be better at helping the child get his homework done on time.

Consider your child's view of his other parent at different stages of his life. Some parents' skills are most valued when a child is young, while others are more appreciated when the child is older. For example, a nurturing adult will be in his element with babies and toddlers while a good conversationalist will likely be more involved with her children later in life. With two adults, there is a greater likelihood that a child will click with at least one parent throughout his different life stages.

Now consider your child's other parent's qualities and characteristics from your **child's point of view**. On the following activity, write down several characteristics or qualities that your child can value or admire, either now or in the future. Be honest. Giving your child's other parent a compliment won't hurt you.

The Other Parent

(As Seen Through My Child's Eyes)

See your child's other parent through the eyes of your child. What qualities, characteristics or skills does he/she have that the child values or admires? Does the parent like to have fun? Is he well organized? Could he share his gardening skills, her tennis skills, his car maintenance interests, her knowledge and enthusiasm for the environment or wildlife? Is he a good listener or is she a dynamic speaker? Write down at least five of the qualities, characteristics or skills that you identified.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



from the acknowledgment of hearing something positive about his or her other parent.

You'll find that giving your child's other parent a compliment can't hurt you. Instead you'll be proud of what you've done for your child's self-esteem. And that meets your goal.

Earlier you listed some of the other parent's characteristics or qualities that can be seen as positive, either through your eyes or your child's eyes. Review that list now. Find an opportunity to weave a comment about one of these characteristics into your conversation with your child. "You sure have fun with your dad. You and he laugh a lot." Or "You and your mom have a special relationship. She's a really good listener, isn't she?" Remember, **you don't have to like everything about the person to make a positive comment about the person.** You don't have to hate everything about the person you've divorced either. Even if you're resentful about the person's actions toward you, separate those actions out and pretend you're putting them in a mental "box" to take out and examine from time to time. Use another mental box for placing the positive characteristics in. Use the contents of this second box when you're with your child. Not only is it valuable for your child to hear you compliment the other parent but your action will also strengthen the bond between you and your child. You'll show your child that you're on his or her side.

Keeping Your Child Out of The Middle

It is not only the parents who place the child in the middle of parental confrontations. Children will consciously or unconsciously choose to place themselves in the middle of their parents' battles too. Therefore, it is important not to jump to the conclusion that the other parent is at fault for every situation. Your child may in fact be the manipulator. Your child may create a situation, such as a problem at school, which typically results in getting his parents talking. It is the child's attempt to reunite his parents. Sometimes the child takes a "middle" position because it has the power to get a parent upset. This is very empowering for a child; she learns to manipulate a situation just to see the expected result.

Example #1:

The child says, "Daddy said you're bad because you let me stay up late." If the parent responds with, "He did, did he?" and gets visibly angry and upset, the child discovers the enormous power he has, even when he's fabricated the situation.

Instead you can respond with, "It sounds like you're confused with the different bedtimes." This focuses the attention on the message about the problem rather than the inference about the other parent.

Example #2:

The child says, "Mommy says you don't love her anymore, but she still loves you."

How would you respond? Can you think of a way to respond that doesn't directly comment on the other parent's words, but focuses on the child's message?

Here's one way you could respond: "I don't love your mother like married people love each other. It seems as if you'd like us to get back together again. That is not going to happen. But you will still see both of us. We still love you very much."

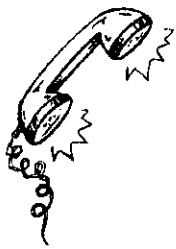


Handling Difficult Moments

When You're on the Receiving End of a Note

You've decided that from now on you won't send a note or message for the other parent with your child. However, you receive a note from your co-parent which your child delivers to you. What should you do? Accept the note without reacting with words or actions. Review the note out of the presence of your child. Then contact the other parent during a time when your child will not overhear the conversation. Consider using an "I" message: "I'm concerned when Mary delivers a note from one of us to the other, she might feel responsible for our actions because it puts her in the middle. What I'd like is for you to contact me directly either by phone or mail."

When Children Refuse to Visit or Talk to a Parent



Another difficult moment that may tempt you to think the worst about the other parent arises when a child refuses to visit or talk to a parent. If you are that parent, it is easy to assume that the other parent may have done something to damage the relationship between you and your child; or if it's the other parent, that he or she has done something to the child.

However, the child's refusal may have nothing to do with you or the other parent. A young child may not want to leave the primary parent for fear that this parent may abandon her while she visits the other parent. This is a normal reaction. A child may refuse to speak to a parent on the phone because he is absorbed in his favorite game or watching his favorite television show. Always respect your child's desire to get off the phone. Likewise, a teenager may refuse to visit a parent because she'd rather be with her friends for the weekend. Remember, these situations occur in intact families as well. They do not necessarily have anything to do with the other parent's behavior.

When in doubt, check it out. And don't take it personally. Discuss the matter with the child's other parent, if possible. Ask the other parent if he or she has noticed the child's resistant behavior. What sense do they make of it? How long does the crying last? What usually stops the crying? What is the parent's response when the child becomes tearful or resistant? Mutually decide on a plan that will ease the transition. For example, if the child is young and anxious about being away, let her take her stuffed animal or doll along. Have the parent cover the doll with kisses and hugs before leaving. Then the young child can be encouraged to get lots of hugs and kisses whenever she wants them.

If the child refuses to speak to the parent on the phone, first review the situation and take into consideration your child's developmental level, interests and schedule. Agree on a time to call your child that would fit into both of your schedules. Know your child's activities and favorite television shows so you can avoid calling at those times. Remember that a young child's attention span is very short. Perhaps ask the child to sing one of his favorite songs or recite a nursery rhyme. If the child is in grade school, talk about friends at school, school projects and activities that you've shared. Have a routine for starting and finishing the conversation that the child can look forward to.



Remember children do not separate themselves from their parents. Therefore, if one parent plays the role of victim, the child is at risk of feeling responsible for the victim-parent's feelings. The child is put in the unfortunate position of fulfilling the parent's emotional needs. He's gone from being a child to being the parent of his parent. It is too great a responsibility and he can break under the weight of its burden. On the other hand, if one parent is aggressive and the child views her as "bad," then the child is "bad" too. Instead, utilize your support system for fulfilling emotional needs and then set to work to improve the situation that is causing your greatest concerns. Put all your efforts into improving your financial position, making new social contacts and enjoying contact with your child. Share the best of your emotional experiences with your child and get help for handling negative emotional experiences. Your child will be the beneficiary of your wise decisions.



Creating Two Homes

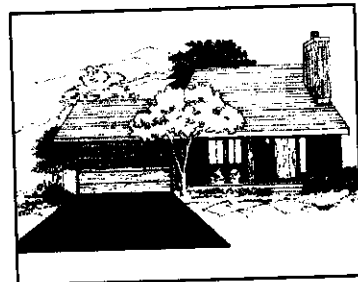
It is important to create a home environment that provides your child with a sense of belonging. Remember your child has two homes no matter how much time they spend in each.

1. Build predictability and security in both households:

- a. Establish and maintain consistent routines and structure. Share routines that work with the other parent. As much as possible agree on bedtime, chores, morning rituals and homework. It will help both families.
- b. Establish and maintain consistent rules and procedures for discipline. Although children can adapt to different rules and procedures in several settings, adhering to the same procedures eases their adjustment. Work together as a team whenever possible.
- c. Establish and maintain responsibilities for your child. Children achieve a sense of belonging and build self-confidence by contributing to the family. Chores suited to your child's developmental level and interests can help her gain a sense of place in the family. Refer to the book *"Raising A Responsible Child"* by Elizabeth Ellis, Ph.D. for additional information.
- d. Make time with your child as natural as possible. Sometimes the non-custodial parent tries to make up for time lost by filling weekends with "special events." What your child will remember most is the accumulation of experiences. Being there for bedtime, homework and pleasurable activities such as playing catch and reading books is important.
- e. Spend one-on-one time with each of your children. Plan an activity that your child finds enjoyable. Remember it can be as simple as coloring, reciting nursery rhymes or putting puzzles together. This is especially important if you have a significant other.
- f. Encourage your child to make friends in both neighborhoods and invite friends over.

2. Build continuity in both households:

- a. Make a personal place for your child. It is important for her to have her own bed or at least a sleeping bag at each house. If she is unable to have her own room, provide a dresser drawer for her to store personal belongings.
- b. Provide toilet articles and adequate changes of clothes including shoes, socks, pajamas and undergarments at each house.
- c. Honor your child's preference if he wants to carry favorite items back and forth between homes.
- d. Allow your child to contact the other parent by telephone each day. Establish a regularly scheduled time for telephone contact. Assure you child privacy. Avoid calling right before bedtime or during your child's favorite television show.
- e. Allow your child to have a picture of the other parent in both homes. Allow your child to choose where the photograph will be located.
- f. Post a calendar illustrating the days your child will be living with each parent.
- g. Share important information with your child's other parent. Keep them informed of medical and dental visits and recommendations. Provide copies of report cards, school pictures and photographs of special events. Also, notify the other parent of important events in your child's life, such as school performances, sports activities and dance recitals, as soon as possible.





Allowing My Child to Love Both Families

Directions: Plan to do two or more of the following behaviors during the week. Add behaviors until you have practiced all ten.

1. Allow your child to spend time with extended family members on both sides of the family
2. Leave a framed picture out of your child with both sets of their grandparents or extended family members.
3. Mention positive qualities of members of your child's extended family. Find a way to value what they have to offer to your child.
4. Recognize and comment on qualities that your child received from extended family members. Such as, "You have Grandpa's talent for drawing."
5. Encourage your child to remember the extended family member's birthdays, anniversaries, and other holidays with cards or phone calls.
6. Make sure your child responds appropriately when gifts are sent from the extended family.
7. If the extended family calls to speak to your child, and you answer the phone, attempt to say a few pleasant words. Remember, your child is listening.
8. Separate your negative feelings about your former spouse from your feelings for his/her family.
9. Do not assume that the extended family is speaking negatively about you.
10. Correct any inappropriate comments that you may have said with regard to the extended family. You might say, "I used to be upset with them, but I'm not as upset anymore. It's getting better all the time."

