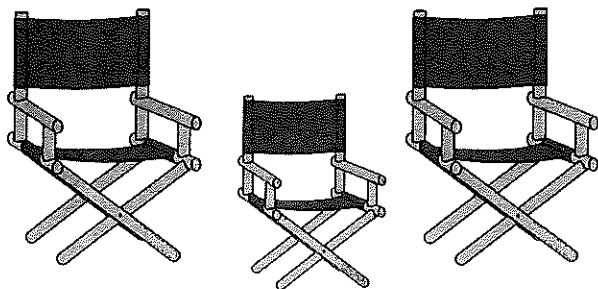


A View From the Little Chair



Children Need Information

We know that children need information. It can be very disturbing, especially to young children, to have a family breakup occur and not have anyone prepare them for what is happening. A parent attending a divorce education program once asked, "What about the truth?" "Who's going to tell them the truth?" They deserve to know the truth!" In a marriage counseling session, one parent announced, "I want to leave. I want a divorce." The other parent then said, "If you are breaking up our family, I want the children to know the truth." As parents separate there will be a great deal of passion about the "truth." What do we tell them?

His and Her Truths

Here's the problem: "Whose truth are you going to tell them?" When parents are in conflict and hostile towards one another they almost always have two different truths to tell. They are often very passionate about their truths, each equally convinced that their individual truth is the "real" truth. Such conviction gives them the high moral ground to tell the children their truth because it is the "real" truth. When parents do this, it is very compelling for the opposing parents to protect themselves by telling the children their version of the truth. After all, their truth is the "real" truth!

Children in the Middle

Common sense tells us that children are hurt by being placed in this loyalty trap. It is a no-win situation for the children. To choose mom, they must reject their dad. To choose dad, they must reject their mom. If one parent wins, the children lose. Make no mistake, this hurts children. Research on children of divorce provides clear evidence that this causes stress in children and places them at risk for behavioral and emotional problems.

The Children's Truth

The solution to this dilemma is to appreciate that there is a third truth to consider. It is the truth of the children. They have their own perspective. Because of their young ages and their inability to be heard, we have to quiet ourselves to become aware of their truths. If you have one of those small children's chairs, sit in it and try viewing the world from a child's perspective. What would it be like to have your parents, your only known security in life, to be so angry with one another? What would it be like to be the age of your child and feel that you must choose one parent over the other?

The Facts vs. The Children's Truth

A parent once challenged saying, "Aren't we splitting hairs here? If he or she filed for divorce, isn't that the truth?" Of course, these are the facts. But parents must consider the difference between the "facts" and the "children's truth." The children's truth represents their needs. Do they need to hear "Your mother or your father decided to breakup our family" or do they need to hear "Your mom and dad are not going to live together, but you still have two parents who love you and will remain in your life. We will always be there for you." Isn't that the truth?

A View From the Little Chair

Now, and in the future, when parenting disputes occur, try sitting in your child's little chair and think of solutions that come from the truth as they see it. It will reflect their needs most accurately. If you can do this, the children will always win!

"At three years old, I was too young to understand about my parent's divorce. All I knew is that I had two of everything. Two houses. Two sets of toys. Everything that I wanted. This only lasted a couple of years. By the time I was nine or ten I dreaded going over to my father's house because there was another woman there that my father tried to get me to call mommy. I became very angry because I already had a mother and didn't want a new one. My weekly visits turned into weekly fights."

Jennifer, Age 22
Age 3 at time of separation

Child's Letter: Living with Mom's Truth

This mother projected her feelings onto her son. She assumed that her son felt the same as she did. He hid his true feelings from his mother.

Reality Check: Are you assuming that your children are feeling the same as you are?

"I didn't feel anything when I first found out about my parent's divorce because my parents both sat me down together and explained it the best they could. My mother and father stayed very civil toward each other. I know they did it for me. If one parent disciplined me the other respected his or her decision. They always discussed my schooling and all of my needs together. I definitely had the loving environment even though they were separated."

Kathy, Age 20
Age 6 at time of separation

Child's Letter: Living with Dad's Truth

This father had an ideal new family in his mind. His sense of family differed from his daughter's sense of family.

Reality Check: Are you imposing your beliefs or hopes onto the children?

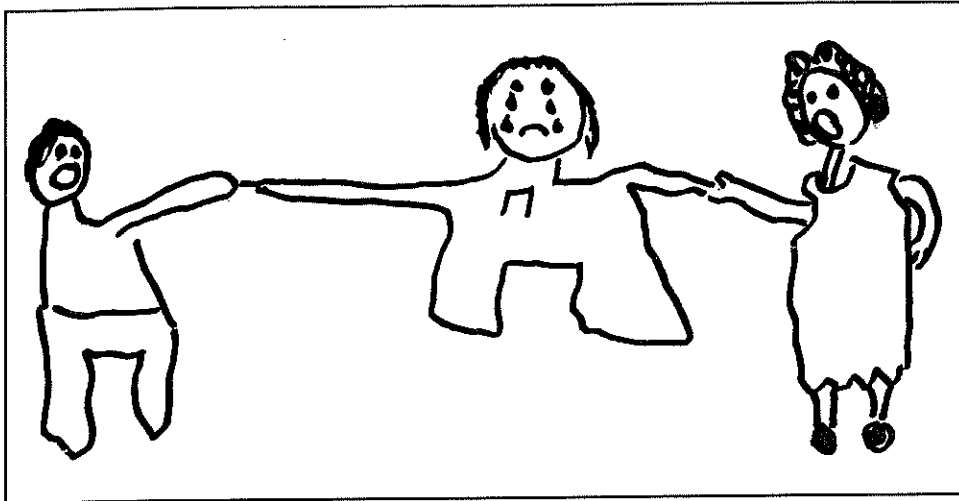
"I came home from school and found my mother crying in the kitchen. She said, 'Your father is gone and wants nothing to do with us.' I cried and ran to my room where I talked to no one for several days. I went to school, ate, and went to my room. Finally, one day my mother opened my bedroom door and said 'The bastard is here and wants to talk to you. Go down and tell him yourself to get lost.' I went downstairs and was so glad to see him, but I knew if I let go of this emotion my mother would feel betrayed. So from that day on, I haven't spoken to him."

Robert, Age 19
Age 10 at time of separation

Child's Letter: Parents Living with Child's Truth

These parents were sensitive to how their daughter felt and they organized themselves around her needs.

Reality Check: Congratulations if you have achieved a state of co-parent cooperation. If not, do less of what hurts and more of what helps. See Appendix D.



Child in the Middle Drawing

These parents were confident that they each needed to save this little girl from each other.

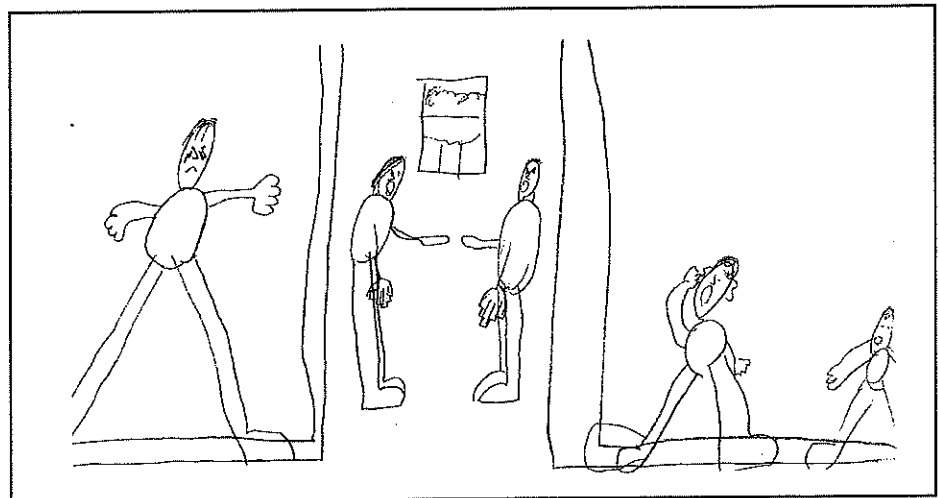
Reality Check: Do your children feel caught in the middle?

Family picture drawn by a ten year old girl.

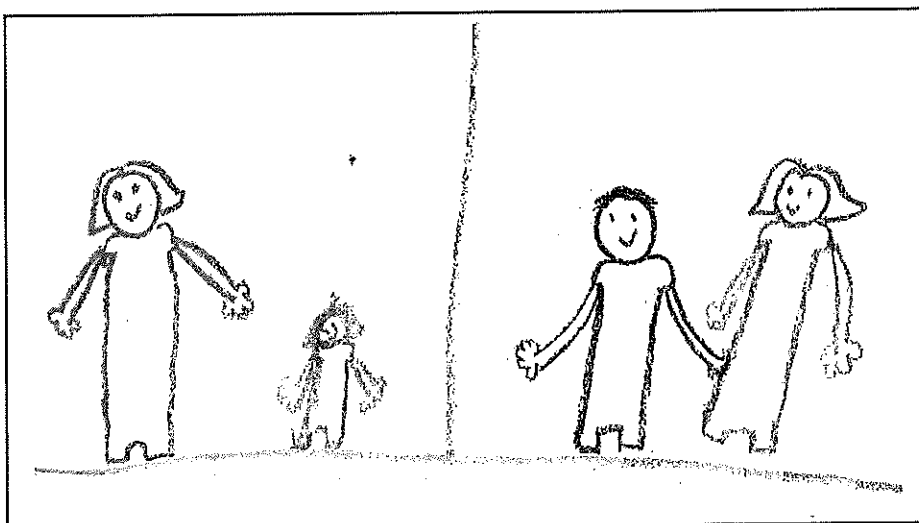
Children Listening Drawing

These parents believed that their children really didn't pay much attention to their fighting.

Reality Check: Are your children exposed to parental fighting and arguing?



Family picture drawn by a nine year old boy.



Child Inhibited by Conflict Drawing

This little girl drew her family with her dad and his new wife on the right and her mom and her new baby brother on the left. She didn't draw herself. She said, "I don't know where to put myself."

Reality Check: Do your children feel the need to take sides or hide their affections for a parent?

Family picture drawn by an eight year old girl.

Infants & Toddlers

Birth to 2½ Years

Babies are born with the capacity and the need to form emotional attachments with protective caregivers, usually their parents. These attached relationships make them feel secure. This external source of security is later internalized. To form secure attachments, caregivers need to show warmth, responsiveness, and consistency. It is possible and likely that children will be attached to several caregivers. Because of their limited ability to retain memories, infants and toddlers should see each of their parents every few days.

It is normal for young children to show some separation distress when leaving the security of an attached parent. They may display distress at leaving either or both parents, and again, upon returning. These young children are highly sensitive to potential danger signals.

Children will be frightened by parents who fight in front of them or who are obviously distressed. It will cause them to cling to one parent. Their clinging behavior is sometimes the source of allegations of neglect or even abuse. Parents who reunite with children after a long separation should employ a reunification strategy of graduated contacts with the children.

Time Sharing Considerations

- Primary household recommended
- Parental cooperation required for shared physical custody
- Partial custody parent has 2-3 contacts a week
- 1-2 nonconsecutive overnights with attentive, attached caregiver should be okay
- Limit separations from children to 2-3 days
- Establish structured and predictable time-sharing schedule.
- Employ graduated reunification strategy where long separations have occurred
- Use trial periods with modifications
- Schedule evolves with age of children

Possible Age-Related Problems

Possible Problems

Sleep Disturbance: Caused by inconsistent sleep routines in two households.

Emotional Memories: Fear responses to hearing and seeing parents fight.

Attachment Problems: Insecure or disorganized emotional attachments caused by inattentive parents or infrequent contact.

Separation Distress: Infants and toddlers may show distress when separated from emotionally attached caregivers. They may also display fear reactions to being with an unfamiliar parent.

How to Help

Parental communication to coordinate napping and bedtime routines.

Avoid fighting in front of the children. They will feel it even if they don't understand it.

Provide warm, responsive, and consistent emotional care. Establish predictable and developmentally appropriate time sharing schedule.

Avoid long separations from these young children. Establish calm, conflict-free exchanges. Avoid signally distress cues. Allow children to take comfort items from house to house. Implement reunification strategy for long separations.

Note: Court ordered family therapy, co-parent coordination, or other interventions may be necessary when high conflict parents cannot work together to adequately address serious problems experienced by the children.

Pre-School Children

3 to 5 Years

Children of this age have wonderful imaginations. The same imagination that has them believing in Santa Claus may now disturb them with fantasies of abandonment and disorganization. Unable to grasp the concept of time, they may find it difficult to tolerate the time between visitations. With a strong emotional attachment to their parents, they may become distressed at exchanges. Under stress, children at this age may resort to a more immature level of behavior, such as thumb sucking or bed wetting. Because their quality of thinking is rather self-centered, they have a tendency for blaming

themselves for their parents' breakup. They may become agitated and distressed before or after exchanges. As they enter pre-school, they may be less mature and more distracted than their fellow students.

Time Sharing Considerations

- Primary household still recommended
- Parental cooperation required for shared physical custody
- Partial custody parent has 2-3 contacts a week
- 2 consecutive overnights with attentive, attached caregiver should be okay
- Limit separations from children to 3-5 days
- Maintain structured and predictable schedule
- Employ graduated reunification strategy where long separations have occurred
- Use trial periods with modifications
- Schedule evolves with age of children

Possible Age-Related Problems

Possible Problems

Self Blame: Self-centered thinking causes them to blame themselves for the breakup.

Fearful Fantasies: Parental fighting combined with children's magical thinking may cause fantasies of abandonment or imaginary threats.

Worry & Regression: Family chaos may cause worry, nightmares, and return to younger behavior.

Behavior Problems: Reacts to family distress with angry, acting-out behavior or may appear sad and withdrawn.

How to Help

Reassure them that it's not their fault. Provide follow-up reminders.

Shield them from parental conflict. Prepare them for changes. Talk to them together, if possible.

Provide stability, structure, predictable schedule. Help them talk about their feelings.

Shield them from parental conflict. Provide stability, structure, and comforting routines.

Note: Court ordered family therapy, co-parent coordination, or other interventions may be necessary when high conflict parents cannot work together to adequately address serious problems experienced by the children.

Early Elementary School Children

6 to 8 Years

Grief and sadness are the overwhelming feelings of these six to eight year olds. Dominated by sadness, they may cry as they grieve the lost parent. Boys and girls of this age have fantasies about how their parents will reunite one day. They may try to become parental caretakers. They can become too helpful, too good. These perfect little helpers may be masking their pain and worries with their caretaking behavior.

This is a particularly sensitive age for children to get stuck in the middle of parental conflict. Parents may compete for the children's loyalty. In the midst of this family upheaval, they are establishing themselves as students. They are painfully aware of their school per-

formance and how it compares to the work of their classmates. Their grief, sadness, and anger may distract them from their studies. They may become behavior problems for their teachers. Taking the behavior problems at face value, the teacher may label these youngsters as a troublemaker. This, of course, will only make matters worse.

Time Sharing Considerations

- Children may be able to tolerate shared physical custody
- Parental cooperation and close proximity are required for shared physical custody
- 2-4 consecutive overnights weekly with attentive caregiver should be okay
- Limit separations from children to 5-7 days
- Both parents support children's schooling and activities
- Use trial periods with modifications

Possible Age-Related Problems

Possible Problems

Loyalty Conflicts: Loving a parent disliked by the other parent causes anxiety and hidden affections. Quizzing leads to false reports.

Poor Self-Concept: Poor support and preparation for developmental tasks causes failures and leads to poor self-concept.

School Problems: Parental conflict leads to poor school preparation causing underachievement and negative image as a learner.

How to Help

Provide unconditional approval of children to love the other parent. Don't quiz. Keep your feelings to yourself. Demonstrate civility.

Provide coordinated support and encouragement for efforts of children.

Provide parental communication and support for children to master challenges of learning.

Note: Court ordered family therapy, co-parent coordination, or other interventions may be necessary when high conflict parents cannot work together to adequately address serious problems experienced by the children.

Late Elementary School Children

9 to 12 Years

Anger is the single most notable emotion of late elementary school age children. With an improved ability to think and reason, they are likely to make judgments about who is "right" or "wrong." If they are mad at one or both of their parents, they are more likely to tell it like it is or, at least, harbor quiet resentments. It is during this age that moral reasoning develops. They may be quick to criticize what they may see as hypocrisy. It is not uncommon to find them taking sides with one parent blaming the other for this tragedy. The divorce can also interfere with the formation of their identity, especially gender identity. Children at this age

refer to their family for a sense of who they are. A child who rejects a parent, especially a same-sex parent, is likely to have a shaken sense of identity and lowered self-esteem. They may feel embarrassed within their peer group or have difficulty adjusting to a new school group if they have to relocate.

Time Sharing Considerations

- Children can tolerate shared physical custody
- Parental cooperation and close proximity are required for shared physical custody
- Children may prefer primary residence closest to friends
- Limit separations from children to 7 days
- Both parents support friendships, schooling and activities
- Flexibility and consistent contact should be maintained
- Use trial periods with modifications

Possible Age-Related Problems

Possible Problems

Taking Sides: Development of logical thinking within a context of parental conflict cause them to be aligned with one parent and reject the other.

Low Self Esteem: Identification with parent who is criticized causes children to absorb negative self image.

Peer Problems: Relocation, embarrassment, and social withdrawal shakes their standing in peer relationships. Demanding pre-teen social environment.

How to Help

Avoid displacing anger for the other parent onto the children. Avoid blame. Keep them out of the middle. Help them understand that parents can be imperfect.

Avoid criticizing the other parent. Shield them from conflict.

Encourage and support healthy peer relationships. Build relationships through activities that emphasize their strengths.

Note: Court ordered family therapy, co-parent coordination, or other interventions may be necessary when high conflict parents cannot work together to adequately address serious problems experienced by the children.

Adolescents

13 to 18 Years

Adolescents tend to have a profound sense of mourning over the loss of their family as they have known it. Taking on a more adult-like physical form, they may freely express their anger at one or both parents. This is a time when teens spend much of their time with their friends or talking on the phone or communicating on-line. Yet, they still need a connection with their family for guidance and limit setting. With the breakup, the security of their parent-child relationship may appear to vanish. Greater peer-group loyalty coupled with reduced parental supervision may lead to trouble. Drug and alcohol use, teen pregnancy, and juvenile delinquency are some of the

possibilities. In school, they may be too preoccupied to concentrate or complete homework assignments. If there is a reduction in guidance, there may be less focus on the importance of school in their lives. Boys may tend to become behavior problems. A need for intimacy may lead to increased promiscuity, especially among girls.

Time Sharing Considerations

- Children can tolerate shared physical custody
- Parental cooperation and close proximity are required for shared physical custody
- Children may prefer residence closest to friends
- Both parents support friendships, schooling and activities
- Flexibility and consistent contact should be maintained
- Use trial periods with modifications

Possible Age-Related Problems

Possible Problems

Risky Behavior: Divided parental attitudes leads to loss of authority over children. Discipline problems. Issues of smoking, drinking, drugs, delinquency.

Sexual Behavior: Family conflict may speed them into intimate relationships. Teen pregnancy. Sexually transmitted diseases.

Poor Self-Image: Poor image drawn from fragmented, conflicted, or denied family. Poor male-female relationship modeling.

Troubled Relationships: Oppositional behavior to a parent may be passively or actively encouraged leading to troubled parent-child relationships. Poor relationship skills transfer to other authority figures and peers.

How to Help

Parental communication on shared values for setting limits and discipline. Monitor activities and peer relationships. Mutual support of consequences.

Help them make informed decisions. Communicate values.

Help them see that both parents may have good qualities even if they are separated and they can be who they want to be.

Unless there is a genuinely abusive or negligent parent, don't interfere with the relationship between the children and the other parent. They must make their own peace. Don't let them fight your fight.

Note: Court ordered family therapy, co-parent coordination, or other interventions may be necessary when high conflict parents cannot work together to adequately address serious problems experienced by the children.

“I” STATEMENTS

I feel _____
(State a feeling)

When _____
(Describe the exact behavior)

Because _____
(State the need that relates to that feeling and any thought or belief related to it.)

What I want is _____
(Describe the exact behavior that would most meet the need)

EXAMPLES:

1. I feel happy when your things are picked up, because I need to have things tidy in order to feel good about our house. I want to thank you for being so considerate of my need for order.
2. I feel very disappointed when your brother is hit because one of our family rules is no hitting. What I want and expect is cooperation in following the family rules and for you to use another way to express yourself

HELPFUL HINTS:

1. Take time to think before you confront.
2. Use a sincere voice that expresses caring.
3. Be concrete and use specific examples.
4. Make eye contact.