

3 Preventing Children from Being “Caught in the Middle”

Children as the Messengers

If the other parent is using the children as messengers you can try the following:

- Acknowledge that it is hard for children when they are asked to be the “message service” for parents, and that it is important for parents to try not to put children in the middle.
- Suggest that the children say something to the other parent like:
“When you ask me to tell things to mom/dad, I get nervous or worried that I won’t get the message right.”

Listening to your children and answering their questions

Parents often spend a lot of time “telling” things to children. Taking time to listen as a single parent can be a challenge, especially when you have so much more to do now. Be patient and non-judgmental when listening to your children so that they know it will be safe for them to express what is important to them.

Children may ask difficult questions about what is going on between you and the other parent. When they do this, it can be tempting to let loose and say negative things about the other parent. Useful rules are:

- Answer only the question.
- Keep it brief.

When children are ready, they will ask for more information.

Sometimes parents don’t know the answer to what the children are asking. Rather than making something up or ignoring it, a parent can say, “That’s an interesting question – you know, I’m not sure about the answer. But I’ll try to find out some more information so we can talk about it again.”

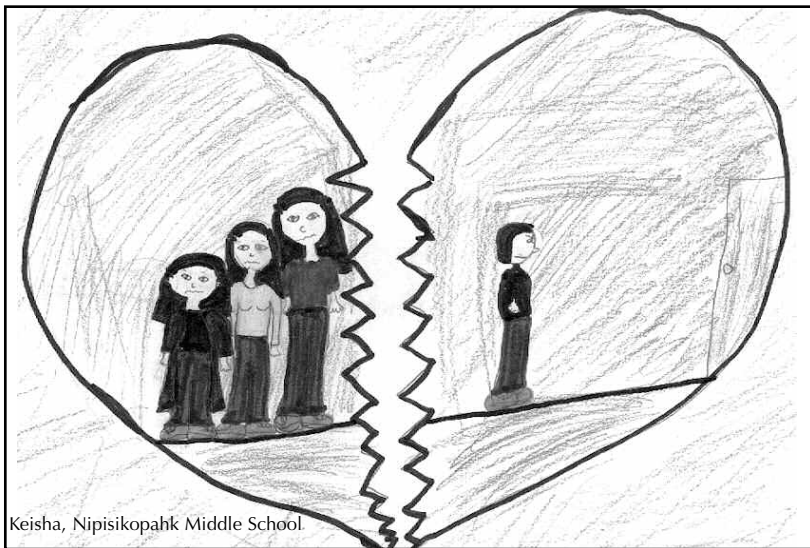
Parents don’t know the answers to everything. Often children really believe that adults do have all the answers. It can be a great relief to them to understand that sometimes parents don’t know things, and that this is normal and okay.



The following are examples of difficult questions a child may ask and some suggestions as to how to respond:

1. Why doesn't mommy/daddy want to see me anymore?

- Assure children it is not their fault.
- Resist saying negative things about the other parent.
- Check with members of the other parent's family to see if and how they would like to maintain a relationship with the children. You may need to put your own feelings on the shelf and concentrate on what your children want.



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2. Do you still love my mommy/daddy?

- Try not to answer with a simple "no."
- Try something like this: "I only want good things for your mom/dad"; or "I would never want anything bad to happen to your mom/dad because I know how much they mean to you and we shared part of our lives together."

- If you still love the other parent and hope to get back together, it is best not to tell this to your children. It may raise false hopes, make them feel they have to take care of you, or feel they should try to get you and the other parent back together again.

3. Your children come home from the other parent's home and appear upset. They tell you: "Dad/mom says you waste money, party all the time, sleep around with anyone who will have you ... Why is dad/mom saying these things? Are they true?"

- It is natural to be defensive – take two deep breaths and try saying something like this: "I'm so sorry you had to hear that, that must have been hard to listen to. I will contact mom/dad and ask them not to say those things to you. I wish I could say they will never say these things again, but I don't know that."

- If the negative remarks continue after you have asked the other parent not to let the children hear them, you may talk to your children about your relationship and ask if that is how they see you or know you. Explain that mom/dad is angry and you're sorry they have to hear those things.
- Depending on the age of the children, they may have to set boundaries with the other parent by saying, "I do not want to talk about mom/dad today."
- Children will often ask hard questions about your relationship with the other parent. For the most part all children need to know is they do not have to worry about things that are adult issues. You and the other parent love them and will take care of them. The job of parents is to protect children from information and conflict they cannot handle or do anything about.

How to prevent children from being "caught in the middle"

DO:

1. Shield your children from battles between you and the other parent.
2. Respond calmly and with confidence if the other parent tries to argue with you in front of the children.
3. Resist the urge to respond when the children tell you bad things the other parent has said about you.
4. Keep all discussions of legal and financial matters away from the children. For example, do not talk with the children about child support payments.
5. Support the children's relationship with the other parent as long as the children are safe.

DON'T:

1. Argue with the other parent in front of the children, in any circumstances.
2. Say hostile things about the other parent when the children may overhear.
3. Ask children to pass messages on to the other parent.
4. Use children to get information about the other parent's personal life.
5. Ask children to keep secrets from the other parent

