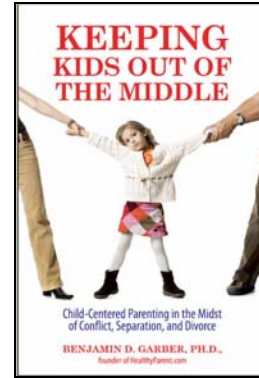


Conducting Family Transitions in the Best Interests of the Children



© 1994-2010 Benjamin D. Garber, Ph.D.
Practice in Clinical and Forensic Psychology
32 Daniel Webster Highway, Suite 17 • Merrimack, New Hampshire 03054
(603) 879-9100 voice • (603) 879-9070 facsimile • papaben@HealthyParent.com

Find Dr. Garber's book, "Keeping Kids Out Of The Middle" (HCI, 2009) at your local bookstore or order from www.HealthyParent.com

1. Keep the child out of the middle.

Children deserve the opportunity to make and maintain the healthiest relationship they can with each of their caregivers, uncontaminated by the adult conflict. This means:

- ✓ Never allow your child access to adult-related materials (e.g., court documents)
- ✓ Don't ask your kids to choose between their caregivers. Even a well-intended question like, "would you like to spend Saturday with your dad?" can be a burden.
- ✓ Never make your child into a messenger between the two homes. It's your responsibility to communicate directly with your co-parents.
- ✓ Never expose your child directly or indirectly to negatives about their other caregiver.

2. Expect and allow your child's strong emotions.

Your relationship with your child's other caregiver weaves an emotional safety net for your children, the source of his or her confidence and security. When holes appear in that safety net, children understandably have strong reactions. They become anxious and scared, angry and sad.

When security is compromised, healthy development can stall or go into reverse. This is called regression. It's not unusual for a child facing a major life stress to become needy, clingy, dependent and defiant. Kids are at risk for resuming behaviors characteristic of much younger children.

3. Anticipate that your child feels guilty about the separation and hopes for a reunion.

Emotion defies logic and experience. Children routinely blame themselves rather than blame a parent for a painful experience, and maintain a fantasy of family reunion long after a divorce is finalized and parents have new partners. Understanding these feelings can help a child cope with the separation and can help you understand a child's motivation in many otherwise confusing circumstances.

4. Co-parents must work together to create a predictable, consistent and secure world suited to the child's needs.

In the face of a family transition, children need security. Security can be created by assuring that some part of the world is stable and safe. It is only when a child feels secure that he or she will be able to cope with the strong feeling evoked by the family transition.

- ✓ Predictability creates security. A child's advance knowledge about where he or she will be at any given time, with whom and in what activity provides security. Make a calendar suited to the child's age and ability that makes daily events and transitions among caregivers predictable.
- ✓ Familiarity creates security. Help your child maintain as much familiarity as possible throughout the family transition. This may involve things as small as inclusion of familiar items from one home into a second home, or as large as avoiding changing daycares or schools or peer groups while the family is still in transition.
- ✓ Consistency creates security. Establish and maintain the same rules expectations over time in each home, avoiding the tendency to "give in" because the child has "suffered so much." Unprecedented treats, rewards, and extended privileges do not help a child adjust to the family transition, even though they may make you feel better in the short run.
- ✓ Consistency between homes is equally important. Minimize the differences in rules and expectations between homes by communicating and negotiating frequently with your co-parent. Do not fall victim to a child's efforts to "split" between parents: "Come on, mom! Daddy lets me do it!"

5. Establish and maintain clear boundaries between the child's new families.

You and your child and your co-parent(s) formerly constituted a single family. The boundaries used to be between your family and other families. Now the child belongs to two families. Be clear what the boundaries are between these two new families. Do these two families go out to supper together? Do the two families celebrate holidays together? Do belongings go back and forth between families or stay at one or the other? Often, it is important to keep families very separate and distinct, avoiding situations which will feed into a child's fantasies of reunion.

6. Beware of your own guilt, anger and grief!

You deserve your feelings, too. Be careful where and how and with whom you share your feelings. Chances are that showing the full extent of your feelings about the family transition to your child is inappropriate and even harmful to the child. Do not fall into the trap of letting your child take care of you. Take your feelings to friends, colleagues or professional helpers, not to your children.

Dr. Garber is a clinical psychologist practicing in Merrimack, New Hampshire.
Visit WWW.HEALTHYPARENT.COM to learn more about healthy families,
about Dr. Garber's services and publications.