

Ask the Therapist

Q: As a single parent, how can I help protect my child(ren) from feeling as though they are in the middle of my ex-husband and myself?

A: This is one of the most challenging dilemmas children of divorce face. If one parent is trying to get their child(ren) to align with them against the other parent, it creates a difficult loyalty bind for your child. While you have no control over your ex-spouse's behavior, you *do* have control over how you react to their behavior, what they do with your child and what your children are telling you. You want to protect your child from becoming an active participant in any hostility that may exist between you and your ex-spouse.

One of the worst things a parent can do to their child when going through a divorce is to use them as an ally or as a weapon – the flip side of the same coin. Either role puts him in a very difficult and damaging position. Instructing a child to be a messenger to the other parent is demoralizing. If your child comes to you with a message from your ex-spouse, the best response is to reflect on how it must feel very upsetting to be put in the role of messenger for the other parent. Expressing empathy to the dilemma he finds himself in will help him feel validated and understood and at some point may open the door for him to feel safe with you to share his true feelings about the situation. Asking your child questions about your ex-spouse, i.e. “Was Daddy’s girlfriend there this weekend?” puts the child in a bind as to whether or not to say something that may hurt you if the answer is yes. Suddenly, he will feel trapped.

Children want to please both parents and don’t want either one of them to feel hurt. When placed in the role of messenger, children often times take on the role of protector of their parent. This ultimately creates insecurity for a child and can cause him to exhibit the anger that exists between you and your ex-spouse and can lead to acting-out behavior and/or depression or anxiety over time.

If your child expresses angry feelings toward the other parent when with you, it is best to reflect his anger by saying something like, “It sounds like you are feeling disappointed by your time with your father.” You then want to empower him to speak to that parent about his feelings. “I bet your dad would want to know that you want to spend more time with him during your weekend visits with him. Do you think you can share your feelings with him?” Reflecting and being empathic to the predicament that your child is expressing to you indicates that you have

faith in him to communicate with the other parent so you don’t get sucked into unhealthy dynamics and the good parent vs. bad parent scenario is not set up.

It is hard to hear your child complain about their time with your ex, particularly if you know they have a valid complaint and you feel helpless to do anything about it. It is important to consider that your reaction can worsen the situation if you join in on bashing the other parent. Reflecting your child’s hurt and encouraging communication with the other parent, while also expressing sadness that they are hurting will help your child feel confident in their ability to work it out and communicate your boundary. Children are frequently relieved when they realize one parent is not going to engage in the criticism of the other. Sometimes, they may even be testing the waters just to see how you will react to whatever information they tell you.

Refraining from letting your children hear you say *anything* negative about their other parent, while often difficult, is crucial. Exhibiting respect for their other parent will help decrease the risk of your child feeling that loyalty bind. It is also important to set boundaries with extended family members who may dislike your former spouse – to let them know it is damaging to the kids for them to hear that.

Maintain your role as a parent – don’t try to become your child’s friend or peer. They need you to be their parent, not their friend. It can become emotionally overburdening for children to feel as though they have become their parent’s confidante and friend.

Maintaining the balance of keeping your emotions and feelings toward your ex-spouse in check and being in tune and empathetic to how your child is feeling during and after the divorce will help protect your child(ren) from struggling with a loyalty bind and feeling stuck in the middle between you and your ex-spouse. Regardless of your feelings towards your child’s other parent, that person is his parent, and that needs to be respected. Your child will ultimately respect you for honoring that relationship.

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