

Worksheet W2.1 (1 of 2) – Putting Children in the Middle

Directions:

Look over the list of ways that parents can put “children in the middle.” Check those things you have done that puts your child in the position of having to take sides with one parent or the other. Select one or more items that you have done and consider how you might have handled the situation differently. Ask yourself: 1. How does this make the child feel? 2. What is a better way to handle this situation?

| <u>Putting Children in the Middle</u> | <u>Child's Feelings</u> | <u>How to Avoid Putting Children in the Middle</u> |
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When the child comes home late after spending time with the other parent, you get angry with the child.

You tell your child, “Have your mother (father) buy it for you—she’s (he’s) got all the money.”

You tell your children the divorce was your mother’s (father’s) idea.

You tell your children they can always go live with the other parent if they don’t like it here.

You ask your child to take messages to the other parent: “Take these bills to your father (mother). He’s (she’s) the one who is supposed to pay your doctor bills,” or “If I don’t get Christmas money this year, tell your mother (father) I won’t pay child support,” or “The house is still half mine so be sure your mother (father) has the furnace repaired.”

You question your child about the other parent—what he or she is doing, who he or she is dating, what he or she said to the child, how he or she is feeling.

You tell your child the other parent does not care for him/her. Or the child hears you saying nasty things about the other parent.

You tell the child the only reason the other parent spends time with him or her is for appearance’s sake or because the court ordered it.

Putting Children in the Middle

Child's Feelings

How to Avoid Putting Children in the Middle

You say to the child that even though you are divorced, you may get back together someday.

You invite your child's sympathy by saying things such as, "You don't know how badly I hurt," or "If you only knew how badly your mother (father) treated me."

You deny the children time to visit the other parent saying that it is too hard on you and that you miss the children too much.

Other ways you have put your child "in the middle."

AVOID PUTTING CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE =

ANSWER KEY

3

middle. When parents direct their negative feelings about the other parent to the children (because the other parent is not available to receive them), children may feel they have to take sides. A child will feel "caught in the middle." We will be talking about some typical situations that put children in the middle, how these situations affect your children, and ways you might handle the situation that shows love and support toward your children.

Worksheet Discussion [20 Minutes]

Please refer to the worksheet, **Putting Children in the Middle (W2.1)**. Look over the list of ways that parents can put children in the middle. Check those you have done. If you have other ways that you have put children in the middle, write them in the space provided.

Now select the items you checked and consider how your child may feel when you do/say the things listed. What might you do instead to avoid putting your child in the middle?

Give a few moments for parents to write their thoughts down. Have parents select items from the list or situations they have experienced personally. Open up discussion by asking parents which of the situations they have faced. Use the time to discuss situations that are of interest to the parents in the group. Talk about children's feelings and what parents could do to avoid putting the child in the middle. For each situation, some ideas are listed below that may be useful to you as parents share their ideas.

Putting Children in the Middle

Child's Feelings

How to Avoid Putting Children in the Middle

When the child comes home late after spending time with the other parent, you get angry with the child.

Anger toward both parents, sadness, feeling they are being treated unfairly

Welcome the child home telling him/her how happy you are to see him or her. If getting children back late is a recurring problem, talk directly to other parent.

You tell your child, "Have your mother (father) buy it for you—she's (he's) got all the money."

Child may feel insecure and scared.

Being a single parent can add a financial crunch. Try not to blame the other parent or your children. A child may begin to think that if he/she were not there, you would have enough money. Develop a new budget.

You tell your children the divorce was your mother's (father's) idea.

Child may place blame on other parent—feelings of abandonment.

Accept the divorce and move on with your life. Avoid blaming.

You tell your children they can always go live with the other parent if they don't like it here.

Child may become anxious and fearful about expressing his or her feelings and thoughts.

Realize that getting children to follow rules and be responsible takes time. They may be having a tough time adjusting. Be patient and consistent in applying your household rules.

ANSWERS KEY

You question your child about the other parent—what he or she is doing, who he or she is dating, what he or she said to the child, how he or she is feeling.

Asking a child to "spy" on the other parent confuses the relationship the child has with both parents and is damaging to his or her emotional well-being.

Consider whether you simply curious or want to feel better about yourself—knowing that the other parent is not doing OK. Avoid asking about the other parent. Find other interests in your life.

You ask your child to take messages to the other parent: "Take these medical bills to your father (mother). He's (she's) the one who is supposed to pay your doctor bills," or "If you don't get Christmas money this year, tell your mother (father) I won't pay child support," or "The house is still half mine so be sure your mother (father) has the furnace repaired."

Child who is involved in parents fights may feel torn and resentful because he or she needs to love both parents.

Learn to communicate directly with the other parent, not through the children. Children do not want to be involved in parents' fights.

You tell your child the other parent does not care for him/her, or the child hears you saying nasty things about the other parent.

Your children can lose respect for both parents and themselves because children are part of both parents.

You may be angry with the other parent or feel the children should know the "truth" about the other parent. However, it is damaging to the children. Try to say something positive: "I can't get along with Daddy (Mommy), but you certainly can and I hope you two will continue to have a good relationship," or "Daddy/Mommy did drink a lot, but he/she was well-liked by his friends when he/she wasn't drinking."

You tell the child the only reason the other parent spends time with him or her is for appearance's sake or because the court ordered it.

Children don't feel good about themselves if they come from a "no-good" parent; children need to discover the strengths and shortcomings of each parent themselves.

Be positive about the time the other parent wants to spend with the child. This may be difficult if you feel the other parent did not take this kind of time when you were together. Put aside those feelings and let the child enjoy time with each parent.

You say to the child that even though you are divorced, you may get back together someday.

Children may fantasize that parents will get back together

Avoid encouraging thoughts of reconciliation.

You invite your child's sympathy, saying things such as "You don't know how badly I hurt," or "If you only knew how badly your mother (father) treated me."

Children will feel thrust into the role of caring for the parent; they may miss out on being children

It's natural to expect a child to take on household responsibilities. However, in the area of emotional support, it is critical that you develop a social support network apart from your children.

You deny the children time to visit the other parent, saying that it is too hard on you and that you miss the children too much.

Every child wants to be a part of each parent's life; anger and resentment will result if you deny a child time with the other parent.

Creating a new life for yourself is not easy, but is necessary. Use the time when children are with the other parent to join a club, visit the library, participate as a community volunteer, etc.

Other ways you have put your child "in the middle."

Concluding Comments:

Any time a child is asked to turn his or her back on and renounce either biological parents, he or she runs a major risk of developing low self-esteem. Give children the freedom to love whom they want. You give that message through subtle and not so subtle messages. It's important to set aside your negative feelings so children can see themselves as worthwhile persons.

References:

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Divorce Games—Nobody Wins. Start Making it Livable for Everyone. Waupaca County UW-Extension. Undated.

Peter Barnett, Christine P. Gaudio, and Margaret G. Sumner. Parenting Children of Divorce. Family Service of America. 1980.