THE CHILD COMES FIRST / PARENT RESOURCE

Keeping Kids Out of the Middle

Practical Ways to Protect Your Children from Adult Conflict

Kids can feel the weight of adult conflict even when no one asks them to take sides. You cannot control every interaction with the other parent, but you can choose steps that help your child feel less responsible for the disagreement.

FIVE WAYS TO KEEP KIDS OUT OF THE CONFLICT

1. **Keep messages between adults.**
   Use direct, appropriate adult communication rather than asking your child to deliver schedules, complaints, money requests, or decisions.
2. **Let your child care about both parents.**
   Avoid putting your child in a position where showing affection for a parent seems disloyal. Your child does not have to manage your feelings.
3. **Listen without investigating.**
   Ask open, gentle questions about your child's experience. Avoid repeated questioning about what happens in the other home or seeking evidence through your child.
4. **Name feelings without assigning blame.**
   You can say, "That sounds frustrating," without asking your child to judge an adult or agree with your interpretation.
5. **Make transitions predictable.**
   Share confirmed plans in age-appropriate language, prepare belongings, and keep exchanges brief and calm when possible. Do not make promises you cannot control.

REMEMBER

Kids can love both parents, have difficult feelings about a situation, and need protection from adult conflict at the same time. Their feelings do not have to become evidence in a disagreement.

What to Say Instead

These examples are starting points. Use wording that fits your child's age and circumstances.

SIMPLE WORDS THAT HELP

Instead of: "Tell your mom/dad they need to change the plan."
Try: "I will talk with the other adult about the schedule."

Instead of: "What did they say about me?"
Try: "How was your day? Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Instead of: "You know which parent is right."
Try: "The adults will work on this. You do not have to choose sides."

Instead of: "Don't tell your other parent."
Try: "You can talk about your feelings with a trusted, safe adult."

ONE SMALL CHANGE TO TRY THIS WEEK

One moment when I can respond differently:

_____

What I will say or do instead:

_____

When I will try it: _____ What I will watch for: _____

USE CLEAR FOR THE ADULT DECISION

Clarify the actual decision. Look at your child's needs. Explore realistic options. Arrive at what can be decided or proposed. Roadmap the next step. Keep your child out of carrying proposals or resolving adult disagreements.

A NOTE ABOUT SAFETY

This handout is not a recommendation to cooperate directly when there are threats, intimidation, abuse, coercive control, or safety concerns. Seek individualized guidance and use safe communication or legal processes as appropriate. Children can be encouraged to speak with a trusted, safe adult about anything that worries them.

Educational resource for reflection, not a parenting assessment or individualized legal or mental-health advice. It does not change a court order.