



When the Other Parent Doesn't Play Fair

BY SUZANNE J. GELB

SOMETIMES A PARENT WHO has unresolved anger about divorce and the issues that surround it directs this anger at his or her former spouse by behaving unfairly as a coparent. This animosity, which can manifest in irresponsible conduct such as not showing up for visitation or inappropriately discussing the divorce with the children, invariably frustrates the other parent and distresses the children.

Following are some suggestions for handling commonly occurring circumstances originating from the conduct of the other parent.



Stay calm. Some parents get annoyed when the other parent does not play fair (“What’s your

mother up to now!”); others raise their eyebrows and sigh with disgust; and many, unfortunately, lash out in anger, telling their children in no uncertain terms how terrible the other parent is. Good judgment often is thwarted as anger triggers harsh decision-making (“I will not allow you to see your dad anymore!”). Such responses are detrimental to children, causing them to feel guilty and conflicted (“It’s my fault. If it weren’t for me, Mom wouldn’t be so mad”).

While divorce can be hard on children, it often is the hostility between parents that affects them most. When one parent does not play fair, the nonoffending parent must resist the temptation to react angrily and lash out in front of the children. Strong feelings must be set aside and dealt with later in private. This will allow the parent to handle these situations matter-of-factly, turning adversity into a positive learning experience for the children.



No-show dad. Perhaps nothing is more frustrating than when a parent does not show up for visitation. When six-year-old Pete’s dad did not pick him up to take him to the movies as planned and did not call to cancel, Pete’s mother was irritated. Now she

had to reschedule her dinner plans and stay home with her son. Even worse, she could tell that Pete felt unloved and unimportant.

Nonoffending parents must set aside angry feelings about unexpected schedule changes and reassure their children that it is OK to be disappointed when plans fall through. (“I know your dad loves you,” Pete’s mother said empathetically, “but that was unfair that he didn’t pick you up or call.”) She can then shift the focus to a positive alternative. (“The movie you were supposed to see has already started, otherwise I’d take you to see it. Let’s watch that new video we bought and order pizza.”)

Children who are let down by a parent also may be at risk for thinking that people cannot be trusted. They often

emulate this conduct by not keeping their word. A nonoffending parent must emphasize to the other parent the importance of keeping promises and, that if plans change, everyone involved should be notified as soon as possible.



Meddling with visitation. Equally exasperating is a parent who interferes with visitation and/or encourages the children not to visit the other parent. At breakfast one Sunday, eight-year-old Tim's mother tells her son that she will take him to the carnival that day, even though Tim usually spends Sundays with his father, Jack. "You can skip going with dad today," says Tim's mother. "We'll have a great time at the carnival."

When Jack arrives to pick up Tim and learns of the carnival plans, he yells at his ex-, "Sunday is Tim's day with me. How dare you make plans for him! Besides, his grandmother is expecting him for lunch. I'm sick of your games. I'll sue for full custody. Then you'll never see Tim again!" Tim feels miserable about this. "Come on, Tim," says his father, storming out of the house. Tim turns to his mother and pleads, "Mom, I really want to go to the carnival, do I have to go with Dad?" At this point, his mother has no answer for him. Tim hears his father honking impatiently and reluctantly goes to the car.

Jack's angry reaction to this problem was inappropriate. Instead, he should have exercised some self-control and calmly told his ex-wife: "My time with Tim is important. Please don't make plans for him on my days without asking me, and don't encourage Tim to cancel his visits with me. We should be teaching our son to honor commitments." Jack also should have explained to Tim that it is all right to be disappointed about not going to the carnival, but that he loves him very much and their time together is very important to him.

Children need to have a close and secure relationship with both parents whenever possible. No matter how aggravated parents may be when their visitation is interfered with, they must set aside their feelings and approach the other parent in a civil way, striving for a solution that maximizes children's time with each parent.



Making children choose sides. Sometimes a parent will discuss the litigation or marital problems that led to the divorce with their children, hoping to turn them against the other parent. When nonoffending parents become aware of this, usually during conversations with the children, many explode and badmouth the other parent; others hide their hurt feelings and avoid dealing with the issue.

Nonoffending parents should handle this problem by first composing themselves and then giving their children

the facts. When Dan, 16, confronted his mother with, "Dad says the divorce is all your fault, you had an affair," she was distressed that her son had been told this lie. After collecting her thoughts, she replied, "I can't control what your dad says, but I promise I haven't been unfaithful. I'm glad you asked. Please come to me anytime you have a question."

This honest exchange teaches children that when allegations are made it is important to get all the facts (*i.e.*, hear both sides of a story) before drawing a conclusion. Children also learn to handle sensitive matters with compassion and understanding.



Where's the money? Parents often have to deal with problems caused by the other parent not meeting financial obligations. When child support is late or not paid and a parent cannot make the rent, or when funds for a school activity are not forthcoming and the children cannot attend the event, nonoffending parents may vent frustration to their children by criticizing the other parent for being such a loser and for victimizing the family. This financial irresponsibility also may cause children to feel angry and unwanted.

Nonoffending parents need to keep their emotions in check and tackle the situation briefly and directly, while still being respectful of the children's relationship with the other parent. Turn this adversity into an opportunity to teach children how to deal with disappointment ("We have learned to do without things that we can no longer afford.") and how to budget. ("We have less money now, so we need to plan carefully how we spend it.")

As one mother explained to her 10-year-old, "Amy, I know your dad loves you, but for some reason he's not paying child support, so we need to move to a less expensive apartment."

She then reassured Amy that there was nothing to worry about and that they would manage this economic setback.

When Josh's dad failed to contribute his share of the fee for a school outing that his mother could not cover on her own, the 11-year-old was visibly angry and upset because he could not go. "I understand how you feel," said his mother as she gave him a reassuring hug. "I know how much you enjoyed the outing last year, and I'm sorry you can't go again. I've tried to get the payment from your dad, but he just hasn't sent it."

It is healthy for children to express how they feel, as Josh did, when a parent does not play fair. Many children hide their sadness and anger because they are afraid that expressing these feelings will upset their parents. Children need to know that their feelings are acceptable and they should be encouraged to express them.

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Using children as messengers. Children often experience conflict when their parents use them as go-betweens. (“Tell your father he’ll have to drop you off an hour later on Friday.”) The message often elicits a sharp retort (“Your mother’s got some nerve! I have other plans later on Friday.”), and the children feel caught in the middle and guilty for causing the argument. This can trigger depression and low self-esteem.

Children who are used as messengers also are at risk for lying and manipulating to get what they want, even to the point of altering the message. Other potential problem includes children’s conveying the wrong message by mistake or forgetting to pass it on.

Nonoffending parents need to address this problem with the other parent in a rational and straightforward manner: “Please communicate with me directly, not by sending messages through our children. They need to see us interacting civilly and respectfully.” For those nonoffending parents who cannot seem to get through a conversation with their ex- without a fight, one option is to communicate in writing, such as via e-mail or by sending notes in the mail. Keep the content factual, rather than personal. (“Jill has a toothache,” not, “Jill has dental problems because you always forget to have her brush her teeth.”) Do not get emotional; stay on track by addressing topics, such as scheduling, financial matters, and school or health issues.



Neglecting schoolwork. Divorced parents often feel guilty because they have less contact with their children. Some try to compensate by using the time with their children to have fun. When a parent prioritizes fun activities over important responsibilities, such as homework, chores, or going to bed on time, this can be a source of frustration to the other parent.

When 10-year-old Sam’s mother, Dana, gets resistance from him on doing his homework (“Dad doesn’t make me do this. He takes me to a movie or ball game after school.”), Dana needs to contain her frustration about how irresponsible her ex-husband is. Instead, she should talk calmly, but firmly, with Sam about taking responsibility for his homework. (“If your dad wants to take you to a movie, remind him you have homework. Studies take priority. I will certainly have a talk with your father about this.”)

After speaking with her ex- and realizing that he has no intention of holding Sam accountable for his homework, Dana rearranges her schedule with Sam so that Sam’s dad has him on weekends, giving her two extra weekdays to

oversee homework. Nonoffending parents may need to compromise and be flexible if the other parent will not cooperate. The best situation for children is to have two parents who act in their best interests. However, one responsible parent can make a difference.



Soft on discipline. Divorce inevitably creates insecurity in children. They need as much certainty and routine as possible, including the same rules in both households on important issues, such as discipline, bedtime, curfew, and homework.

Sometimes even when parents agree on rules, such as bedtime at 8:00 p.m., one parent does not enforce the agreement, letting the children stay up later. This often generates confusion and disobedience from children and resentment from the other parent.

When Sara’s mother tells her it is time to go to bed, the nine-year-old protests, “It’s only 8:00 o’clock, Dad lets me stay up until 11:00 every night. I don’t have to listen to you.” Sara’s mother is outraged. “If your father doesn’t start sticking to the rules, I won’t be letting you see him anymore.” Sara is devastated by this threat to cut off contact with her father. She also resents her mother for being so strict.

Ideally, instead of reacting angrily, Sara’s mom could have responded calmly, “Your bedtime is 8:00 p.m. You need your rest so you’ll be alert in school. I will be discussing your bedtime with your father.” The child’s father needs to be told that his lax approach is causing behavior problems. (“Sara’s becoming manipulative and pitting us against each other, using what you do at your house as an excuse not to follow the rules at mine. We should be teaching her healthy habits, such as going to bed at the time we agreed upon so she gets enough sleep.”)

Nonoffending parents must try to resolve these discipline issues with as much goodwill and courtesy as they can muster. Some parents resent having to be polite when the other parent is so uncooperative. The key here is choosing to behave civilly for the sake of the children. Their focus is appropriately on the children’s well-being, rather than on any negative feelings between ex-spouses.



When to seek help. If nonoffending parents find that despite their efforts to solve problems the other parent continues to behave unfairly, then coparenting counseling may be necessary. Favorable outcomes are best achieved when both parents attend this therapy.

On a personal level, if a parent has difficulty managing his or her anger about an ex-’s unfair behavior, and this interferes with being a good coparent, then consult a mental-health professional to address these issues. Counseling

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also is indicated when children exhibit behavioral and emotional problems in response to the divorce, and their parents are unable to help resolve them. Signs that help may be needed include sleep difficulties, academic problems, aggressive conduct, anxiety, withdrawal, and depression.



Prioritizing the children.

Although many families are affected by divorce each year, it is possible to minimize the emotional harm to children. One way to achieve this is for parents to maintain a civil relationship that focuses on their children's needs.

All too often, however, a former spouse will choose to be uncooperative as a coparent and behave unfairly. Fortunately, the effects of this conduct

can be mitigated when the other parent sets aside hard or hurt feelings and understands that coparenting continues despite the divorce. With a focus on the children's best interests, the nonoffending parent can tackle any challenge matter of factly and teach the children that setbacks can be overcome. **FA**

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