

# When Your Child Says

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# “No, I Don’t Want to Go!”



**Guidance for  
parents,  
sources of help**

**F**ew experiences are as difficult for a separating or divorcing parent as dealing with a child who is reluctant to spend time with the other parent. The situation is particularly difficult when the child’s behavior or statements mirror a parent’s own feelings or concerns about the other parent.

The suggestions that follow are designed to help overcome a child’s resistance to having contact with the other parent, although the techniques may be useful in dealing with other difficult behaviors as well. Concerned parents also should note that many of the methods described *will* be helpful when there are legitimate reasons to be concerned about a child’s contact with the other parent. When problems are intractable or serious safety concerns exist, a mental health consultation is always advisable.

The focus of these approaches is to strengthen children’s coping skills and enhance parents’ ability to obtain appro-

priate assistance for their children. Children with strong coping skills are more likely to be able to express independent feelings and be heard by adults. Judges are more likely to listen to such children and to parents who follow the rules and make appropriate efforts in their own relationships with their children. Following these procedures will also help any involved professionals make accurate assessments and offer the best assistance for the family.

## **The dilemma for parents**

Many divorcing parents harbor serious concerns about the other parent, which may have contributed to the decision to separate or divorce in the first place. Each parent may sincerely believe that the other engages in behaviors that are not optimal for the children, and each may doubt the other’s sincerity in addressing the children’s needs. When children test limits or express reluctance to spend time with the other parent, behaviors can be compelling and

dramatic. Children may whine, cry, complain about the parent, or even directly refuse to go.

The transitioning parent may think it obvious that the receiving parent is at the root of the problem. The situation is particularly difficult when the receiving parent has problems in parenting or is less experienced or aware of the child's needs than the transitioning parent. The transitioning parent may believe that the best solution is to suspend contact until the recalcitrant child "wants to" spend time with the other parent.

Many separated or divorcing parents have problems with parenting. A custody conflict is often extraordinarily stressful, and both parents may be adjusting to radical changes in their daily lives and to an often-unfriendly legal system. Although parents can sometimes be each other's best source of information, separated or divorcing parents commonly mistrust each other's perceptions and have a hard time supporting one another. This makes handling a child's problems and/or changing developmental needs even more difficult.

All of these circumstances may contribute to difficulties in the relationship between parent and child. In some cases, serious problems exist in the child's relationship with one or both parents and professional intervention or child protection is required. In other cases, the child's behavior results from a combination of issues: the child's age, the parental conflict, either parent's reactions to the child's behavior, or a variety of other issues. Children also may resist transitions because of their own emotional difficulties or feelings about the parental conflict.

Such situations are particularly difficult when a parent disagrees with court orders governing parenting time. The legal system is by no means infallible, and a parent may be correct that a different order would be better for the child. The behavior of a recalcitrant child may both increase the

stress on parents and create a dynamic that appears, at least to a parent, to "prove" that the court is wrong. Parents also may resent any extra effort required to implement a court order with which they strongly disagree. The result can be an escalating cycle of negative behaviors and parental interpretations or responses that are not healthy for anyone involved.

## Coparenting strategies

In addition to the specific strategies outlined below, both parents and children should make every effort to stay focused on some central ideas that underlie most professional recommendations about these difficult situations. These ideas are not always intuitive to parents who are in the midst of a high-stress situation. Counselors, parent educators, and attorneys may help parents focus on the essential issues outlined below.

**Court orders are not suggestions; they are obligations.** This can be one of the most difficult concepts for parents, particularly when they are accustomed to making most or all of the decisions about their children's lives. Although parents may have turned to the court to resolve a parenting dispute, the court's ultimate decision may feel like an intrusion that usurps parents' rights. Enforcement of orders is slow and inconsistent, which may tempt parents to either violate the orders or allow children to decide whether to follow the rules.

Aside from the legal consequences for parents, children may suffer serious emotional harm as a result of parents' failure to follow court orders. Most children are taught from an early age that laws govern society and that children and adults must follow certain rules. They learn to wear seatbelts, to stop at stop signs, and not to damage others' property. A parent's sudden disregard for certain rules or laws contradicts what children have learned all their lives. Associating that

message with the other parent says to the child that normal rules no longer apply. This undermines the consistency and reassurance of adult boundaries, which are so important to children at this difficult time. The effects can be felt far beyond the parental dispute, and can result in serious problems for children.

This is not to suggest that children's feelings are unimportant, or that they should be ignored. Children have independent feelings about their relationships, and often have important concerns that should be addressed and resolved with adult assistance. Parents can comply with court orders and simultaneously open formal or informal communication with the other parent, or seek professional help for the child.

Children also may find that they are better able to resolve problems with the other parent when they spend time together. The focus then shifts to the child's feelings and issues, rather than arguments about complying with the court order. Drawing the child into discussions about the court order places the child in the middle of the adult conflict and may suggest that one parent needs or expects the child to resist the order. At a minimum, this diverts attention from real problems the child may be having with the receiving parent.

**"Scientific method" for parents.** The first rule child custody professionals learn is to maintain professional objectivity and consider all possible explanations for a family's problems or a child's behavior. This is an extremely difficult expectation for separated parents who are dealing with distressed behavior in a child they love. Nevertheless, true understanding of the reasons for the child's behavior may depend on the parent's ability to consider a variety of possibilities.

Fortunately, many parents already are skilled at critically evaluating children's statements. Parents apply those skills everyday in noncontested relationships. Many have been told by a

teacher, “I’ll ‘take with a grain of salt’ what your child tells me is happening at home, if you take ‘with a grain of salt’ what your child tells you is happening at school?” Children need to know that their feelings are taken seriously, but that parents will listen to others and try to gain a true understanding of the situation before taking action.

Transitioning parents need to bear in mind that a child’s behavior or complaints may be affected by knowledge of the parental conflict. A parent who is the focus of a child’s complaints must consider the possibility that both parent-child relationships need improvement. Likewise, both parents should consider that the child might be reacting to changes in his or her life, school pressures, peer anxieties, or any number of other age-appropriate issues. Most important, both parents should think about whether the child’s concerns can be resolved through remedies less drastic than violating the court order, abandoning the parenting plan, or initiating litigation.

**Show your children that you follow rules and that you expect them to do the same.** Structures and rules provide stability and constancy to children’s lives. The basic rules of social behavior generally are consistent across settings and relationships. At times, family routines may seem to be the only aspects of children’s lives that are not caught up in the parenting conflict. Children continue to attend school, to follow rules in various activities, to complete homework, to speak respectfully to adults and appropriately to other children, to resolve problems through words rather than aggression, and to respect others’ property. Typically children are not permitted to solve problems through tantrums or acting out. Most important, when children behave inappropriately, important adults in their lives offer reassurance through redirection. These limits and boundaries provide order and stability to children’s lives, normalize their feelings, and help them adjust successfully as they mature.

Many parents enforce household rules and require children to comply with school rules and traffic laws, but have difficulty requiring compliance with court orders about parenting time. In effect, these parents tell their children that they are expected to follow rules in every area *except* contact with the other parent. These conflicting messages undermine the child’s relationship with the other parent and make it more difficult for children to solve problems effectively. In most cases, parents’ insistence that children follow rules and routines, even while parents seek other resources to resolve children’s distress, is important to children’s development. The message needs to be, “I know you’re upset right now, and we will work together to solve the problem. But for right now, you need to follow the rules.” When Mom makes a point of requiring that Dad be treated with respect, and Dad emphasizes the same standard for Mom, the effect is immediate, healthy, and powerful.

**Support healthy problem-solving.** As children mature, normal development requires that they master certain “tasks” and develop certain abilities. However, it is normal for children to want to avoid problems, rather than having to resolve them, particularly when they are aware of parental conflict and that one or both parents have negative feelings about the other parent. Nevertheless, healthy emotional development requires that children learn to identify their own feelings and *actively* solve problems. Typically, solving problems requires the child to verbalize feelings and speak directly with the other person involved in the conflict. Sometimes learning to listen to each other and solve problems together requires counseling or professional assistance.

Often parental encouragement is a powerful tool. If a child is unwilling or unable to resolve problems directly with the other parent, or if a parent doesn’t respond well, it may be helpful to involve a therapist for the child or a family therapist. Early intervention may produce significant benefits in a short time, particularly if parents are able to cooperate.

## **It is often easier to blame the other parent than to take a hard look at improving one’s own relationship with the child**

Parents can best assist children by separating the behavior in question from their feelings about the other parent. Try imagining your response to your child’s identical behavior toward a teacher, another child, or a member of your extended family. Respond as you would in that situation. This may allow you to resolve the underlying problems.

**Listen.** Once children are behaving appropriately and the parenting transition has been completed, the parent with custody should explore what the child is upset about. In some cases, the child’s fears or concerns will relate to common parent-child issues, such as conflicts about rules, routines, and activities. On other occasions, the child’s concerns will relate to developmental issues, such as the child’s ability to maintain peer activities and relationships while spending time in both households. Children also may have difficulty with the many changes that accompany parental separation.

Although transitioning parents have a responsibility to ensure that children complete the custody transition and respect the court order on parenting time, both parents have a responsibility to actively work with the child to solve problems. It is often easier to blame the other parent than to take a hard look at improving one’s own relationship with the child. Nevertheless, one of the greatest gifts you can give your child is a willingness to address any complaints or concerns that the child has about *your* household, separate and apart from conflicts with the

other parent. You may not solve every problem—for example, children may miss activities in one neighborhood while spending time with the other parent. However, parents can listen to children, empathize with their distress, and seek creative solutions to improve the situation.

Children initially may approach parents with simplistic solutions that are impractical or impossible, or with general frustrations about changes in their lives. Sometimes these discussions will lead to adjustments in the parenting plan, or problems can be addressed through improved communication or adjustments in each household. Parents and counselors can help redirect children's feelings toward creative problem-solving or help the child adjust to new realities that will not change. Just as your child would be expected to try to resolve problems with a teacher before transferring out of math class, he or she should be made to resolve problems directly with each parent before considering a change to the parenting plan.

**Seeking professional assistance.** Notwithstanding parents' best efforts, some behavior problems escalate quickly and resist easy solutions. The interventions suggested here are often helpful, but may be difficult for parents to apply consistently and may not be sufficient in the face of deteriorating child behavior or high tension between the parents. Parents may have difficulty separating their own feelings from those of the child, or trusting that suggested interventions would ease the child's distress. When poor communication between parents hampers cooperation, talk with your lawyer about finding a professional who can coordinate interventions, maintain a focus on the child's needs, and help each parent address problems in the relationship with the child.

Where there is serious reason to suspect a child is in danger, emergency professional assistance may be necessary. Talk with your lawyer about what to do in such a situation. In most other circumstances, parents should discuss a child's need for counseling. Even if one parent has the legal right to initiate psychotherapy unilaterally, treatment is most effective when both parents are involved. A therapist proceeding with one-sided information is less likely to secure the trust of the other parent, to form an accurate assessment of the child's difficulties, or to manage an effective treatment plan.

Therapists familiar with contested custody cases are most likely to be effective in coparenting conflicts. Experienced therapists will be sensitive to the need to involve both parents, consider each parent's perspective, and balance therapy so that the child's independent needs will be emphasized. Effective therapists must confront unhealthy behavior and promote constructive problem-solving, so it is unlikely that the counselor's statements will always please both parents or the child. Look for a counselor's interventions that encourage your child to solve problems directly and to exhibit social behavior consistent

with what is expected of other children the same age. When either parent disagrees with the therapist, he or she should speak directly with the therapist without involving the child. Many therapists can provide useful suggestions for working through such difficulties. Parents should stay focused on productive problem-solving and refrain from threatening to litigate.

Many families resist psychotherapy, feeling that they should be able to resolve problems themselves. Professional counseling is not necessary in all cases, but early intervention may be the greatest gift you can give your child. Many problems can be addressed quickly, and the experience of focusing cooperatively on the child's needs can benefit parents. Even if some problems continue, a skilled therapist can stabilize the situation and keep the child on a normal developmental path.

**Keep options open for the future.** Most problems with parenting transitions resolve over time. Children adjust to having separate households and benefit from what each parent and family setting has to offer. Parents move on with their lives and may even use the time away from their children to pursue individual needs and interests. When parents are feeling more comfortable in their own roles and less concerned about attacks from the other parent, they are more likely to use their strengths to assist the child with future developmental struggles. Mom may be better at language arts; Dad may be better at math. With time, each may become more effective at working together and dividing parenting responsibilities.

In the throes of parenting conflict and/or recent separation, believing that the other parent will make a meaningful contribution to your child may be difficult. The other parent may not have attended to parenting responsibilities prior to the separation, and strong disagreements about parenting and other issues may continue. Leaving open the possibility of improved parenting does not require either parent to alter strongly held opinions. Good-faith efforts at problem solving may not produce immediate results, but may provide options for better cooperation after the divorce. Your child has little to lose and much to gain from your staying open to the possibility that both parents can contribute to your child's well-being and healthy development. **FA**

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