

Child's Greatest Dilemma

Thoughts & Feelings about Parents' Conflicts

Children are much attuned to their parents. They watch your actions and your facial expression. They listen to your tone of voice. They read into your silences. What you do not say impacts them as much as what you say. Remember they learned how to understand their world before they could understand words. Children are sensitive to the conflict ridden interactions between parents, including suppressed and polite hostility.

Children exposed to the conflict between their parents feel pain, anxiety, fear, grief, sadness, anger, etc. They are greatly affected by their parents' actions and have limited or no decision power over the process and outcome. They respond by withdrawing, regressing, ignoring, bargaining, denying, acting out, protecting one or both parents and, at varying levels, by problem solving and accommodating.

In this document you will find a list of thoughts, feelings and worries that children experience. One does not experience them all; but all have been experienced by someone.

Children may feel forced to:

- show allegiance for one parent over another
- show preference for one parent over the other
- show dislike of one parent when in front of the other parent
- choose one parent over the other
- match the disapproving parent's mood and feelings about the other parent
- modify what they tell one parent to protect the other parent
- ask no question as it triggers in the parents anger, criticism, sadness, frustrations, or insecurity about not having the right answer
- check regularly with one parent while with the other parent for fear the other parent feels ignored, abandoned, or for fear of punishment
- withhold showing excitement in front of the disapproving parent when going to the other parent's house
- withhold expressions of joy and affection toward one parent in front of the disapproving parent
- withhold reporting joy and affection toward one parent when talking about that parent to the disapproving parent

- answer requests to communicate by one parent via phone calls, texts, Facetime, Skype, social media, etc., while with the other parent
- reject requests to communicate by one parent via phone calls, texts, Facetime, Skype, social media, etc., while with the disapproving parent
- submit to frequent and lengthy phone calls, texts, Facetime, Skype, social media, etc., by one parent while with the other parent
- obey parenting instructions via phone calls, texts, Facetime, Skype, social media, etc., by one parent while with the other parent
- ignore, reject, show contempt, disregard, denigrate the other parent by fear of reprisal or rejection by the disapproving parent
- express only negative feelings and report negative experiences to the one parent about the other parent
- withhold the expression of sadness and grief to one or both parents about losing convenient access to each parent
- withhold the expression of sadness and grief to one or both parents about the change in how time is spent with the other parent
- withhold telling one parent child misses the other parent
- withhold the expression of sadness and grief about the dream the child had of a happy family
- Withhold expressing how inconvenient it is to travel between homes without parents becoming unsettled, defensive or accusatory of the other parent
- having to receive or demonstrate agreement with a parent, when the parent rolls his/her eyes, sigh, express disapproval or disgust, in a non-verbal manner, about the other parent
- listen to the verbal abuse from one parent onto the other or between two parents
- witness physical abuse on one parent by the other
- participate in physically abusing one parent
- withhold protective actions toward one parent by fear of subjecting that parent or oneself to escalating abuse
- submit to decisions by the parents that result more from one or two parents interfering with a cooperative decision process than what is in the child's best interest

- reject one parent's immediate and extended family when prior to separation visitation was customary
- reject one parent's circle of friends when prior to separation visitation was customary
- reject everything that pertains to one parent
- submit to alternate homes to respect custody arrangements regardless of life's events, moods and needs
- witness arguments without having any control on process and outcome. Silent observer
- blame the other parent for arguments or change in family, parenting
- defend one parent who is criticized by the other parent
- defend the non-favored parent when with other parent's family or friends
- carry messages that bring bad news from one parent to the other
- express opinion about which parent a child prefers to live with (thus preventing repercussion in one household but exposing oneself to repercussion in the other household)
- etc.

Some children, to manipulate a situation in their favor, know NOT to always tell truth about events involving the other parent since they know you will trust what they say if it denigrates the other parent.

Some children feel they are the reason their parents are getting divorced.

Children hear arguments between the parents about the parenting of the child; they may think they are responsible for the discord between the parents.

Children have no control over what is going on; they may they feel powerless, become anxious, depressed or act out.

Some children are overwhelmed by the hostility. They may become anxious, depressed or act out.

In short, the children suffer mostly alone and in silence.