

FIVE RULES FOR KEEPING KIDS OUT OF THE MIDDLE OF PARENTAL CONFLICT

Copy these and place them on your refrigerator door or other visible place and invite the children to remind you if you violate any of them. Any violation of them indicates a lack of sensitivity about what the children may be experiencing and it simply is unfair to ask them to bear the burden of your dysfunctional co-parent relationship.

1. **Have co-parenting conversations (phone, text or email) when the kids are not around.** Even hearing one side of the conversation can be hurtful to kids.
2. **Talk to each other about co-parenting issues (scheduling, child support, major decisions, etc.), instead of sending messages through the children** (e.g. "Tell your dad I will be late picking you up on Saturday" or "Ask your mom if I can switch weekends with her next time."). Parents should work out the details of their co-parenting arrangement on their own and simply inform the kids about what is going to happen. Likewise, if a *child* makes a request to change the schedule, for instance, the best answer is "I'll talk to your mom/dad first and get back to you." The child does not need to know who said what during that conversation – only what was decided.
3. **Always clear a schedule change with the other parent before making promises to the children.** For example, don't tell the child you are planning a beach trip with them during the other parent's week unless you have cleared it first with the other parent. Otherwise, children get their hopes up and then when the other parent says, "No," they are unnecessarily angry with that parent.
4. **Never ask a child to keep a secret from the other parent.** Kids should be allowed to share information freely between their two homes. If there is something you don't want the other parent to know about your life, don't do it or say it in front of the children. Secret-keeping puts the child in an impossible situation and can cause them to feel alienated from both parents and forced to filter information. In the end, they will decide to just stop talking.
5. **Always allow the child to talk freely about the other parent or the other parent's household without judgment.** In other words, if you act like it hurts YOU to hear about their life in the other house, they will feel like they have to filter information for your benefit. Just as you want to know how they feel about school, church, soccer practice, etc., you should be open to hearing what they have to say about their time with the other parent. **Likewise, keep your opinions about the other parent to yourself.** Kids ALWAYS have mixed emotions when on one hand they want to believe a parent is "good" (so they can feel good about themselves), but then have to struggle with their parents' assessments of each other. Let kids discover who their parents are all on their own, even if it hurts. Then you, as the listening parent, simply acknowledge their hurt. YOU CAN'T "FIX" THEIR FEELINGS.