

Don't Use "Force"

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"I won't force the children to go with the other parent," is one of the statements I hear sometimes from parents going through a separation or divorce. This statement has become so common (three times in one day recently), that a short article on this subject may be helpful.

Expectations

Parents have a lot of expectations for their children, for their own benefit. You expect them to go to school. You expect them to do their homework. You expect them to come home at night. You expect them to brush their teeth. You expect them to do their chores. You expect them not to swear in public. You expect them not to have sex. You expect them not to use drugs, etc., etc.

We use all of our resources to "force" them to do (or not do) these things. But we don't use the word "force" with these activities. We use the word "expect" – a positive word for their long-term benefit, rather than a negative word. And your children get the message. So try not to use the word "force," with all its negativity. Instead, use the positive word "expect." "I expect you to go with your mother/father – we both expect that."

It's Not an Option

Of course, children will resist doing a negative option. They don't want to see the dentist. They don't want to go to school on some days. Even parents don't want to go to work on some days. But most of us go to work anyway, because we need to get paid. It's not an option to stay home.

Somehow, children get the message that going to the other parent's house after a separation or divorce is optional. If you give them a choice and imply it will be a negative experience, any healthy child is going to want to avoid it. Since children have so few options in their lives, if you give them an option to avoid something negative, they will avoid it.

Children Don't Like Moving

Most of the time, children like being where they are. When given a choice, many children who live in two households would rather stay where they are at the moment. It doesn't mean that they don't want to see their Mom or Dad, it just means that they don't want to stop what they're doing, get up, pack up, and go somewhere else. Once they get to the other house, they act just the same way. Don't take it personally: most of the time children just prefer where they are and what they're doing. They live in the present.

Use Positive and Negative Consequences

If children don't do the things that we expect, we usually use consequences with them rather than physically picking them up and taking them. This is especially true with teenagers. Instead, we take away privileges or give them new opportunities when they succeed.

Take school, for example. If your child refuses to go to school, do you: Take them out for ice cream? Spend more personal time and attention with them? Take them shopping or to the movies? Allow them to watch TV all day? Surf the internet? If you do, do you think they would increasingly stay away from school? Of course. I have worked with families where this occurred. Instead, if a child resists spending time with the other parent without a very good reason, use the same consequences you would use if they refused to go to school. And don't blame it on the other parent – just be matter-of-fact. In a separation or divorce, attitude is everything.

Avoid Assumptions

In a separation or divorce, it's easy to misinterpret a child's resistance to spending time with one of the parents. It may be about something very minor and the child will change his or her mood soon, unless you give this mood excessive attention or power.

It is easy for a parent to jump to the conclusion that the child has the exact same thoughts about the other parent, such as complicated anger about adult issues that the child may not know about or understand. Or you may be concerned that your child's sadness or anger toward the other parent may mean he or she has been abused or treated badly. While these things could be true, be careful to check them out without making assumptions.

Emotions are Contagious

On the other hand, children do absorb their parent's emotions. It's an important part of how they learn about life, and how they stay connected to their parents. Recent brain research explains how "mirror neurons" cause children to mirror their parents' emotions, as well as behavior. So your child may have picked up your intense emotions about the separation or divorce, and show the exact same fear, sadness, or anger – yet have no logical explanation for it. While it may seem like the child has the same feelings and thoughts that you do, your child may actually just have the same feelings – your feelings.

So be careful not to let your child see or hear your upset feelings about the other parent. Arguments or physical confrontations between parents that are observed by a child can be particularly distressing for a child and may increase their resistance to one parent. Children need to be protected from their parents' behavior sometimes.

Get Family Counseling

If a child develops a resistance to spending time with one parent, it is potentially a serious problem which needs to be treated sooner rather than later. If there is a child abuse issue, it needs to be addressed and stopped. If there has been domestic violence (an incident or a pattern), then this is an important problem to be treated, rather than ignored. Children may be the first to show a problem which needs family attention. And if it is a child absorbing a parent's negative emotions about the separation or divorce, this also needs to get addressed and resolved. Often the best approach is for a counselor to meet with each parent and the child or children before resistance turns into refusal. And if a child is refusing to see a parent, then it is even more important to take this approach as soon as possible. By meeting with both parents at separate times with the child or children, parents can help and support each other in helping their child. Getting an individual counselor for the child is less effective.

Conclusion

Maybe you can't "force" a child to spend time today with one parent. But you can have consequences, investigate the situation, and get the help of a family counselor. In the long run, it will be better for all of you.

High Conflict Institute provides training and consultations regarding High Conflict People (HCPs) to professionals dealing with legal, workplace, educational, and healthcare disputes. Bill Eddy is the President of High Conflict Institute and the author of "It's All Your Fault!" He is an attorney, mediator, and therapist. Bill has presented seminars to attorneys, judges, mediators, ombudspersons, human resource professionals, employee assistance professionals, managers, and administrators in 25 states, several provinces in Canada, France, and Australia. For more information about High Conflict Institute, our seminars and consultations, or Bill Eddy and his books go to: www.HighConflictInstitute.com or call 602-606-7628.