

Battle Lines: When Kids Are

Caught

I N T H E M I D D L E

By Dr. Chris Miller

When divorcing parents fire angry words and actions at each other, kids often become collateral damage. Here are the hows and whys of keeping children out of the middle of any dispute.

Continued

ON JULY 2, 1863, Union and Confederate forces lined up against each other at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Between the two lines of war was a mile-wide open field. Each side shot their cannon at the other, hoping to weaken, if not destroy, the opposing force. Between the two armies was a farm owned by the Bliss family. As the two forces raged at each other and the day wore on, the Bliss farm and family took several hits, ending in the destruction of both the barn and house by the flames of battle.

Whether five or 35 years old, many children of divorce feel like the Bliss farm: caught between two warring armies only to take damaging hits. Children of divorce usually love both parents but get caught in the middle of battles that go on and on. While some parents deliberately put their children in the middle, most do so without being aware of the potential harm.

Divorced parents who have a "good working relationship" communicate with each other directly or through their attorneys. Divorced parents who have a good support system go to their friends for encouragement and to "unload." When divorced parents are deficient in either one of these areas, they often put the child in the middle, thus forming what is called a relationship triangle. "Triangulation" has many forms, reasons, and consequences, some of which are presented here.

Triangulation, or putting a child in the middle, has several "faces" - all of which are dependent on the creativity, desperation, or anger of the parent. One way a child gets put in the middle is when he or she is told to be the courier of a verbal or written message. A mother might say, "Now when you see your father, tell him I won't be around next weekend." A father might tell a child, "Give your mother her check for me." While these requests seem harmless, children do not want to be used as the courier.

Some parents turn their children into spies and thus create a triangle. Some parents teach their children how to get into their ex's computer to find out information. Some parents encourage their children to locate the other parent's cell phone bill and find out to whom they are talking. Others might tell the children to listen in on the ex's phone conversations. Sometimes these children become "double agents" as both parents use them to spy on each other.

Even if the parents find either of these tactics distasteful, they might still use one of the following approaches. Children are convenient dumping grounds for divorced parents. A mother might deliberately put the child in the middle by saying, "Let me tell you what your father did today," only to proceed in slandering the ex-spouse to the child. A father might say, "Your mother angers me so. I just want to exchange our weekends and she refuses to work with me. I'm so glad I'm not married to her." Or, "I would love to see you but your mother won't let me." When a child hears one parent badmouthing the other parent - both of whom they love - the child can feel angry, powerless, helpless, and defensive of the attacked parent. The child takes the hit even if the damage is not immediately seen.

One of the most harmful forms of putting the child in the middle is when a parent who is in pain tells the child about his or her own fears, loneliness, hopelessness, or a need for the child to be strong for the parent. The child, wanting to comfort the parent, might say nothing but can feel confused, burdened, afraid, and a need to take care of or rescue the hurting parent. This is especially true for children and their opposite sexed parent (boy with mother and girl with father).

Why would divorced parents who love their child put their son or daughter in the middle? As noted earlier, most don't triangulate knowingly and certainly most don't want to hurt their child - but the reasons are many. Some parents are simply lonely and want companionship and comfort, and the child is available. Some parents are needy for sympathy and try to extract it from their son or daughter. Other divorced parents have allowed themselves to become so filled with hurt and anger that in their selfishness and blindness they will do whatever helps them to feel better - even if it harms others, in this case the child.

Then, sadly, there are those who knowingly want to turn their child against their ex and gain a friend or accomplice in their child. These parents deliberately give their child information that the child doesn't need to hear and certainly doesn't want to know. They might tell truths about the other parent that are inappropriate for the child to know, or they might blatantly lie in order to turn the child against the other parent. It must be stated clearly that to the child, the motive doesn't matter. Regardless of the motive, whether

intentional or not, putting even an adult child in the middle causes damage of which the child can begin to show symptoms.

Some of the symptoms seen in "in-the-middle kids" can be associated with roles they take on, while other symptoms can be emotional or behavioral. Triangulated kids feel the stress that is being passed through them to the other parent. To cope with this stress, a child could become the "over-responsible" son or daughter or the "little parent" who takes care of other siblings, cooks dinner, or cleans the house in order to "help" a parent. Some of these children might even get good grades in school. On the outside, this child might look fine, but the inner world of the child is stressed, anxious, and unable to relax. Parents can be lulled to sleep by these children, telling themselves and others that the child is handling the divorce just fine. These kids may hold it together for a while but sooner or later they could crash into depression, failing grades, or an addiction.

In their stress and in their desire to reduce their parents' stress, kids might become "on duty" to take care of or rescue a parent. They might seem to be selfless as they are always taking care of their mother or father. Sadly, when this occurs, there is usually no one really taking care of the kids. Their needs go unmet as they are lauded for being so "caring" or "strong." Their "caring" may be nothing more than trying to prevent mom and dad from fighting with each other. The "all-together" children appear untouched by the divorce but they martyr themselves by holding inside all of their pain and hurt. Their goal is to not burden their parents with their issues because "my mother/father has enough to worry about without having to worry about me. I can suffer through this alone."

The emotional or behavioral symptoms of being put in the middle can be vast. They can range from bedwetting, angry outbursts, clinging, or thumb sucking, to sleep difficulties, anxiety, or depression. Eating disorders, promiscuity, substance abuse, alcoholism, skipping school, or failing grades can be seen in teens and adult children caught in the middle. Some children and adult children of warring parents can develop nervous tics, twitches, or addictions.

So what can be done to get children of divorce out of the middle of battles that can rage on for years? First, assess yourself to see if or how you could be putting your child in the middle. If you are doing so, stop immediately. You may wish to explain to your child what you've been doing, the wrongness of it, and your intention to quit. Give kids permission to tell you anytime they feel you are putting them in the middle. Open up the communication and apologize when you err.

If your ex puts your child in the middle, begin by attempting to explain the issues discussed here and seeking a truce, committing to leave the child out of the battle. If your ex agrees, you will have taken a big step. If he or she refuses, denies triangulating, or blames you, then another step can be taken. Teach your child about being put in the middle without being critical of your ex. Let the child know that it is acceptable to respectfully tell you or the other parent that it doesn't feel good to be in the middle. Role-play it with the child, affirming and encouraging his or her success. If the child states that he or she is afraid to do this with the other parent, then possibly a therapist could teach them and provide a safe place for the child and your ex to do this work together. I have witnessed six-year-olds and 15-year-olds "confront" the triangulating parent. I have had 33-year-olds do this confronting on their own. The child feels strong for being honest and safe because a third party was there with them, and the parent learns a new way of communicating with the child. Finally, if verbal communication is too threatening to the child, writing a letter or e-mail to the triangulating parent can prove a helpful tool in changing the divorced family's dynamic.

Divorced families can take big steps forward when the triangle is broken and the child is no longer put in the middle. The battles may continue at times but the damage can be minimized, as these children of divorce no longer become casualties of war.

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