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Dealing with Complaints

By Jeffrey P. Wittmann, Ph.D.

When your children complain about their other parent, you may be tempted to come out swinging. Your impulse to fight for your children can make you say and do things that you may later regret. Here are a few strategies to help confused parents make sensible decisions when children complain about their dad or mom.

Seven-year-old Jonathan returns home to his father's house after a weekend with his mother and is furious. It seems his mother won't allow him to call his friends when he's at her home. Or so he says. His dad picks up the phone and verbally bites his ex like an angry pit bull: "You never did pay attention to what the kids needed!"

16-year-old Deborah returns to her mother's and immediately begins sobbing that her dad is reneging on his promise to pay for her prom dress. He had angrily told her that her mom could use the child support money for the dress; after all, it's clothing and that's what support's for. Her mom sees red. How dare he involve Deborah in their battles about money? She grows fangs and fires off an angry e-mail.

Our impulse to quickly align with our children, to fight their battles, to rescue them, is a deeply ingrained response that can fill us with retaliatory adrenaline and makes us say and do things that we may later regret. We love them and want them to be OK. We may also feel hatred or fury towards our ex for past misdeeds, and our child's complaint offers another chance to get even. Or our child's complaint genuinely worries us because we may be hearing from our little ones that our ex is acting irresponsibly.

When parents are faced with a child's tearful or angry complaint about the other parent, the basic question "Is this a problem I should get involved with?" can also loom large. You know you weren't there to witness "the event," and years of conflict with your ex may make the prospect of another confrontation as pleasing as a root canal.

The following seven strategies can help confused parents make sensible decisions when children come bouncing in the door eager to tattle on their dad or mom.

Decline Unnecessary Burdens

Many parents make the well-intentioned yet unfortunate mistake of seeing every complaint that flows from their child as their problem to solve. And they end up either entangled in endless conflict or with ulcers. Learning to watch for "unnecessary burdens" can help parents avoid this volatile area of problems with their ex.

Ask yourself the following questions:

Was it your child, and not you, who first brought up the concern?

Did your child feel more emotion about the issue than you did?

If the problem were solved, would it be your child's life, and not your own, that would most improve?

Does the problem lie mainly between your child and your ex?

If your answer is "no" to three or more of these questions, the problem is your responsibility to solve with your ex. If your answer is "yes" to at least two of these questions, your child is confronting you with an unnecessary burden. This simply means that you can still choose to help, you can still choose to feel intense concern, but you can also choose to see this dilemma as primarily the responsibility of others (your ex and your child) to solve -- a mental shift that can bring relief.

Beware of Divorce Triangles

A triangle is formed when one person has a problem with another person yet chooses to speak about the problem with a third individual rather than the one they are really struggling with. We choose to whisper to a co-worker about the "gossip down the hall" rather than telling her to her face that her behavior bothers us. We call our mother or father and whine and carp about irksome things our spouse has been doing, without speaking directly to our spouse. Divorce families are fertile fields for the development of triangles, and when a child brings a complaint home about their other parent, an immediate, yet unintentional, triangle-trap is formed. The problem is, if you take the bait -- especially if your child longs for you to intercede on his/her behalf -- your child will never become self-sufficient in communicating with his/her other parent, you may make the mistake of acting out old resentments with your ex, and the problem will never fully be solved.

Lend a Small Ear

Because we love our children, because protecting them is as basic to being a parent as breathing is to being alive, we often become intensely interested, emotional, and wrapped up in our child's tearful or angry complaints. In short, our ears get very big. This causes a child to learn that they gain significant attention by being a cub reporter about the other parent and the cycle continues over and over again. It is therefore best to keep your ears small and listen attentively -- without responding until you've heard the full story and paused to generate a considered response. After all, if your child was coming in the door complaining about being kicked by a peer during soccer, you wouldn't turn red and immediately run out the door to confront the child or their parent because you know there is a child (your child) in the middle who is adding his interpretation to life events.

Respond with Empathy, Calm Control, and Neutrality

Let your child know that you have heard the feelings behind their words so that they feel understood: "Jonathan, you sound mad that your mom won't let you call your friends." "Deborah, you sound sad that your dad won't pay for your prom dress." However, expressing understanding does not necessarily mean that you agree with their version of the story. Our old resentments can quickly bring veins to the surface in anger as we see that our child feels hurt or disappointed by someone who hurt or disappointed us. But such intense reactions that can propel us into rageful phone calls or attempts to rescue our child often make things worse. Responding with emotional neutrality and a calm disposition says to your child, "I know this is hard, but I know you can handle it. I'm here to help." Responding with furious phone calls or angry e-mails says to your child, "You need me to solve this for you. This is a catastrophe! This is my problem, too: we're a team." Nothing could be more divisive. Don't rush to agree with your child that his other parent acted like an ogre.

Resist Taking the Ball Back

It makes perfect sense for a child, especially a young child, to want you to intercede and solve his/her problems with your ex. Although interceding on your child's behalf occasionally makes sense if done in a non-attacking way, and especially when there are questions regarding the safety of your child, in most circumstances you will empower your child by gently communicating that this is a problem between your child and his/her other parent that you believe he/she can handle. Now that you're apart, your child is on a separate life-path with your ex that needs to be honored and that you cannot always fix.

Generate Possible Solutions with Your Child

Your child's complaint can be a precious opportunity to teach her life skills for resolving difficulties with others. A key first step is to gently, and even playfully, generate different choices or solutions your child might try for solving the dilemma with her other parent. Brainstorming solution-ideas with your child can actually be fun and even humorous. At this stage, do not judge any ideas your child generates.

Evaluate the Options

Now go through the different ideas the two of you came up with and look at them carefully regarding the pros and cons for your child and for your child's relationship with the other parent. This process can even be done with young children so that they can be empowered early in life to see themselves as capable of navigating difficult waters with their other parent.

Try Cautious Advocacy as a Last Resort

If your child is too young to be able to assert himself with his/her other parent, and if your relationship with your ex is not explosive, gentle intercession for your child can occasionally be helpful as long as it is done in a non-attacking way.

Sheila had recently taken a job in auto sales that meant her son was often left sitting to play on the floor at her car auctions on their weekend together. George was aware of his son's struggles with this, had heard his son's complaints, and decided to give Sheila a gentle phone call, saying the following: "I heard about your new job, and I'm glad for you. I thought you would want to know that Evan is struggling with not having you available as much as you used to be. I'm just letting you know so the two of you could talk if you wanted to."

Empowerment Isn't Abandonment

Choosing to not shoulder the problems between your child and your ex is not passivity or abandonment. On the contrary, you are empowering your child, not abandoning him/her. After all, all parents are imperfect, and all children have problems with their parents. Helping your child learn to cope with difficulties in their family relationships is a lesson that will stand them in good stead for life. Which outcome is more valuable for your child: having a problem solved (by you) or learning to be an effective problem solver for life?

Respond Assertively to Protect

Over-protectiveness and a quick willingness to do battle for your child can rob him/her of an opportunity for learning how to work through problems with your ex. However, it is important to have a healthy balance between protectiveness and over-reaction. It is true that parents who have been hurt or mistreated by their ex can sometimes be excessively quick to believe their child is being hurt or mistreated. However, never forget that it is your job to protect your child's basic health and safety. If you have reason to believe your

child is being neglected or abused at the other parent's home, quickly involve helping professionals and/or the authorities to assess the risks and to make sure your child is safe.

Focus on What You Can Influence

Above all, accept the fact that you can only control so much, and that one of the areas of your life where you now have little control is in making your ex behave in ways you think are sensible. Turn inward and reclaim the area of your life where you really do have power: how do you care for your children. How do you feed them. How do you discipline them. How do you keep them safe. You may be angry that your son is not allowed to call his friends while at your ex's home. You may feel sad for your daughter that her father is refusing to pay for her prom dress. You may feel broken-hearted that your son's mother fails to show for visits. Sometimes, however, the only path to peace is choosing to accept that there are "bumps in the road" -- pain in life -- that you cannot fully protect your child from.

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