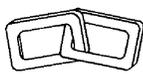


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When Children Become Pawns in the Parental Custody Dispute

Some issues between separated parents are unimaginable. I have heard stories of children coached to call the other parent names; to misbehave; to not eat their food; to be mean to step-siblings.

Indeed, over the years, I have interviewed children who have told me that and worse.

Some parents in a bid to curry favor with their child will actually let them eat junk food as they want; miss school; stay out late; use drugs or drink alcohol or otherwise do as they wish just to make the reasonable parenting of the other parent seem inappropriate.

In other words, there are parents who mess with their children's minds and well-being just to thwart the other parent's relationship with the child.

In the scheme of things, these are rare situations, yet they do occur in sufficient numbers so as to clog courts and child protection agencies with terrible parental disputes. What is the other parent to do?

The challenge in these situations is to remain calm. It is so provocative when the child comes to your home to intentionally misbehave, tell outrageous stories, position you as the bad parent.

It is almost as if you have to turn off your emotions to what is being thrown at you to act nonchalant and never appear upset, angry or defensive. If you do appear angry, upset or defensive, from the child's perspective your behavior will reinforce what they are told about you. Your behavior in that regard will reinforce in the mind of the child that you are the bad parent. You cannot give this impression to your child.

Instead, act unphased, look at the child and say something like, "Well that's an interesting thing to say" and then redirect to the task of the moment. Do not fight, cajole, punish, yell or

scream at your child. When the child is not listening to what is expected, you simply say, "OK... When you want or when you are ready, you can do it... or not... It's up to you."

When the child tells you what you do in your home is wrong (healthy meals), you simply look at your child and say, "You may be right, but this is what we have to eat.. You don't have to eat it if you don't want to." *Non-defensive and non-controlling parenting.*

This is not to say you are giving permission to not listen or misbehave, but that you are not getting inducted or provoked into the child's self-fulfilling prophecy that you are the bad one.

Here is the tricky part; the moment the child moves in an appropriate direction, you provide kind but subtle attention and feedback, "Thanks for coming with us... Thanks for joining in... Nice to..." There can no note of sarcasm in your voice. You must come across as sincere.

The point of all this is to behaviorally present an experience of you that is different than the impression being projected on you by the other parent.

You are seeking to create a cognitive dissonance – a discrepancy in the mind of the child between what the child is told by the other parent and what they experience with you directly. We are hoping that the child internalizes an impression of you based upon their actual experience of you. That is why your behavior matters most and your appropriate behavior must be consistent, calm and non-offensive and non-defensive. *Challenging situations require challenging solutions.*

As for missing school or poor hygiene or poor nutrition, all you can do is document the information provided and to whatever extent possible, gather tangible evidence.

Tangible evidence of school attendance is available in the child's report card. Tangible evidence of poor hygiene or being sent inappropriate clothing could include a friend or other family member documenting or taking pictures of clothing sent with the child. Tangible evidence of poor nutrition could be grocery store

sales receipts although that could be difficult to obtain.

The tangible evidence is for use at court or by child protective services. At times the only way to make one's case, to get out of the cross-allegations is through tangible evidence.

The best tangible evidence is that information provided by other people or services or agencies who have direct knowledge, observation or data – such as the school report card. When gathering such information, it is vital to not be perceived as angry, intrusive or seeking to involve the third party in your court or child protection matter. Reasonable people will seek to avoid your conflict.

If you appear emotional or demanding, this can serve to reinforce a negative impression of you. If you are a pain to the people who have to work with your child, you will be ostracized and those working with your child may develop a tainted view of your child as well. We want your child's service providers (teachers, doctors, dentists) to concentrate on nicely meeting the needs of your child and not view your child as the source of distress by way of your behavior as an intrusive or demanding parent.

Throughout, we keep the child out of the fray. We do not retaliate and we do not say mean-spirited things about the other parent. We don't so much as bristle or roll our eyes or let out a sigh.

Not only do these strategies serve you in a court or child protection matter, they also serve your child directly. By your not getting inducted, by your not losing your cool, then the child has one parent who demonstrates self-regulation and doesn't co-create a toxic environment for the child either in their own home or in the community in which the child lives.

Situations such as these do not resolve easily. They almost always involve court intervention and often the intervention of child protection agencies.

The reasonable parent in this unreasonable situation must have a long term perspective.

There will be many battles along the way, many of which will be lost. However, the long term perspective is knowing that your child will grow up. We want your child to grow up as unscathed as possible with the hopeful view that come adulthood and a more mature mind, they can come to appreciate their childhood experience and then forge a better adult and life-long relationship with the reasonable parent. If you have not been reasonable along the way, you diminish your chance of that adult life-long relationship. This is not to say it will happen for certain, but this is all about doing whatever you appropriately can to improve the likelihood of that adult relationship.

To sum up, play to the long game and worry most about managing yourself versus the behavior of the other parent. You can only control you and determine what you expose your children to.

If you need help or support in a situation such as above, the service to look for is a [separation or divorce coach](#).

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