

On Using Children as Messengers

One of the common mistakes parents who are separated or divorced make is to use their children as messengers. While this may seem like no big deal or may be the simplest way to communicate with an ex, it can put a child in a very difficult position. The effects of using children as messengers can be damaging to children of divorced parents. Dealing with conflict in healthier ways can keep children from being caught in the middle.

Background

Using children to deliver verbal or written messages is an indirect form of communication. It triangulates the co-parents and child, replacing direct communication between you and your co-parent. Children become messengers when parents ask them to “Tell your Mom/Dad_____”, “Make sure that your Dad/Mom_____”, “Don’t let your Mom/Dad_____”, or a thousand other variations. Fill in the blanks with anything. Children also become messengers when parents give them a note to hand to the other parent, even if it is in a sealed envelope.

Many parents ask their children to be messengers in an attempt to avoid conflict with and keep distance from the other parent. Other times, parents may ask children to be messengers because it is an easier or quicker option for them to communicate with the other parent. No matter the reason, using children as messengers is always an ineffective way to communicate and deal with conflict. Here are some of the reasons why it is not good practice.

The Effects of Using Children as Messengers

Using children as messengers catches children in between two co-parents. Children become the go-between, given responsibility that is not theirs. Children messengers are doing something for their parents that the parents are responsible for doing for themselves. Using children as messengers can cause children to feel used. This can be the case even if children are not able to put a name on or explain what they are feeling. Children may feel angry at being used. It will not strengthen a parent-child relationship.

Using children as messengers is an ineffective way to communicate. A form of indirect communication, your chances of miscommunication skyrocket when use children as messengers. Also, not making personal contact sends one or more nonverbal messages (Seaward, 2015).

Using children as messengers sets children up to become carriers of any negative reaction and emotion between parents (McWhorter-Sember, n.d.). It puts them in the middle of the conflict. It asks children to carry the conflict and to be a

witness to their parents' negative emotional reactions (McWhorter-Sember, n.d.). Children often feel the parents' negative reaction is directed at them. Using children as messengers can give children too much authority (Stevens, 2012). It puts them in a position of power they may not be emotionally or intellectually equipped developmentally to handle. The information relayed or returned may not be reliable information because the child does not have an adult perspective about what is happening.

When children are messengers it makes them have a harder time feeling comfortable with their parents. Children may begin to feel distant from both parents. They may not feel like they have a safe person to turn to or they may feel they have to put up walls to keep from hurting their parents. This can cut communication and trust, and harm parent-child relationships.

Many children, by nature of their development, tend to own responsibility for the divorce even when reassured that it is not their fault. Being made the messenger can reinforce the idea that the divorce is their fault and responsibility.

Children are put in the position of being able to alter information being passed along to fit what they want. This is an unhealthy place for a child to be and may increase conflict between co-parents and between parents and children.

A related form of indirect communication with using a child as a messenger is asking a child questions about the other parent's new life. This is asking the child to be a "spy" and puts them in an awkward position of tattling on the other parent, and potentially betraying the other parent. This can lead to increased conflict among parents and between parents and children.

Conflict and stress are hard on everyone, but especially on children. Being put in the middle causes children to feel worry, anxiety and stress. Divorce is already a stressful situation for children and being the messenger increases their stress. Using children as messengers can negatively impact a child's sense of self-worth, school performance, and relationships with friends and family.

Under no circumstances should a child be the messenger between parents, no matter how mundane or benign the message. As a parent, bear full responsibility to communicate with the other parent and deal with conflict in a healthier way. The results will be much better for your child. Avoid using your child as a messenger at all costs, even if it is just for your child's benefit and healthy development.

Avoid Using Your Child as a Messenger

There are several ways you can avoid using your child as a messenger: Planning ahead, establishing healthier ways of communicating that still give you the distance you want, and dealing with conflict in a healthy way are three important ways to not catch your child in the middle. By taking these steps you will be less

likely to fall into the trap of using your child as a messenger, which actually traps your child.

1. Plan ahead to be sure you have no last minute items to discuss with your ex.
2. If you communicate with your co-parent on a more frequent basis, you are less likely to have last minute items to discuss. If you have an established communication plan consisting of how and when you will communicate, you can both plan for and expect when you will communicate, and there will be less room for ambiguity.
3. If something does come up last minute, consider using e-mail to communicate with your ex instead of your child.
4. Communicating via e-mail will make it easy for you to keep the distance from your ex that your child gives. It also allows you to convey the information in a direct, less emotional way. It gives you time to think about what you write, come back and change it before sending the message. E-mail gives you a written record should you ever need one. It allows you both to go back to the "conversation" for clarity in case one of you doesn't remember what was said or what was agreed upon.
 - a. If you establish e-mail as a standard communication form, you will be less likely to be tempted to pass along a message through your child. Texting is another optional form of communication that also allows you some distance from your ex. If all else fails, you can be the one to get out of the car or go to the door or make a phone call to give the message to your ex.
 - b. As a general rule for any form of communication with your ex, be very careful about what type of conversations you have with your ex in front of your child. Children should not be present when you and your ex are dealing with conflict. They should not be able to see you talk or be within ear-shot of you. They should not be able to read texts or e-mails that you send to your ex.
5. Deal with conflict in a healthier way. Here are a few tips for appropriate conflict resolution.
 - Choose to communicate directly. Two disagreeing persons will be able to work things out eventually, unless they allow inappropriate third parties in. Inappropriate third parties only complicate things. The only appropriate third parties to help your communication go right are legal professionals, professional counselors, or professional mediators. Using a mediator may be a great option for you to communicate as a co-parent, especially if you are in a high-conflict

divorce.

- All voices need to be heard. Exchange opinions, attitudes, facts, and perceptions. This opens up the door to greater understanding about the problem.
- Attack issues rather than people. Center your discussion on the costs and benefits of the problem at hand.
- Negotiate and compromise. All parties need to feel that they have contributed to the discussion and development of the solution. The goal is to reach a decision that is agreeable to all parties (Seaward, 2015).
- Use reason, emotional awareness, and/or motivation to share points (Seaward, 2015).

If you are proactive in planning ahead, communicating in appropriate ways, and resolving conflict in a healthy way, you will not use your child as a messenger. Your child will not experience the many damaging consequences that come with being a child caught in the middle of two parents. Instead, you will be a more effective co-parent and parent for your child.

References

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