

# On Undermining the Other Parent

Undermining the other parent may be quite tempting. You likely have at least some harsh feelings for your ex, if not many. Knowing what undermining the other parent entails and how it can impact your child at a deeper level can help you understand that it is not your best option, and should not even be an option.

## Background

To undermine means to make someone's confidence or authority gradually weaker or less effective (Wehmeier, 2005). In the co-parenting relationship, it is a passive-aggressive way to get the child to side with the "underminer" against the other parent, generally without the child even knowing what is happening. It is an indirect way of communicating that triangulates you, your child, and the other parent.

### *Undermining Behaviors*

Undermining the other parent can entail many different behaviors. Many may at first glance appear to be harmless, but in the end do have a negative impact on your child. Undermining behaviors include the following (from (Opperman, n.d)):

- Allowing your child to talk negatively and disrespectfully about the other parent.
- Setting up tempting activities your child will enjoy in order to interfere with the other parent's time with the child.
- Giving the child a choice about spending time with the other parent when no choice exists.
- Acting hurt and betrayed if the child shows any positive feelings towards the other parent or if the child enjoys his/her time with the other parent.
- Suggesting that your child to lie to the other parent.
- Sharing inappropriate details of the divorce settlement with your child.
- Letting the other parent worry needlessly about your child.
- Interfering with the other parent's time with the child with excessive phone calls or scheduled activities.
- Calling and asking if your child is okay when the child is with the other parent.
- Using eye-rolls, sighs, or other non-verbal indicators that show your child that what the other parent has said or done is somehow less than acceptable or less competent in your eyes. This shows contempt and criticism without saying anything aloud.
- Suggesting that your child does not really need to listen to, obey, or even respect the other parent, or the other parent's house, new partner, and or belongings.
- Sending the message to your child that you love the child and that the other

- parent's love is somehow less.
- Setting out to be the “fun”, “nice”, “cool”, “generous” parent, while leaving the other parent to be the responsible, disciplinarian, “bad” parent.
  - Quarantining your child over simple things or made up reasons. For example, not letting them visit the other parent because they have a cold or because you want to spend time with.

This list is not exhaustive, but exemplifies many undermining behaviors. Undermining the other parent can include any behaviors that put the other parent down or that make you out to be better than the other parent. Undermining behaviors are passive-aggressive behaviors and forms of manipulation. They impact your child negatively. Here is how.

### **The Impact on Your Child**

When children experience parental undermining they feel like they have to choose between the parents and have a harder time giving love to or receiving love from parents (Kruk, 2013). Children feel guilt and shame no matter whom they choose to take sides with or even if they refuse to take sides. Guilt and shame can lead to depression, anxiety, poor socialization, doing poorly in school and relationship problems in adulthood (Rodman, n.d.).

Undermining is a form of manipulation. When one parent undermines, they are teaching the child by example that manipulation is an acceptable way to get what you want. The child will often use this in his/her other relationships, later in adulthood, and even with the parent who taught them how to manipulate (Wright, n.d.)

Your children are half you and half your ex-spouse. When you criticize the other parent, you criticize your child. It can also send a message to your child that you do not love them or that there is something wrong with them. When you undermine the other parent you teach the children to disrespect themselves, along with the other parent.

Undermining the other parent can impact a child's self-image and how they act in future intimate relationships. For example, if a father talks in a negative way about the mother, a child learns that his/her mom is defective – and that they are defective. If the child in this scenario is a girl, she will likely develop lower self-esteem and be attracted to a partner who is critical of her and does not respect her. And she will likely not respect herself, seeing herself as defective just like her mom. If the child in this scenario is a boy, he will likely develop lower self-esteem and act more aggressively with his future partner and be critical. Children learn how to see themselves and treat others from their parents' examples. They will allow themselves to be treated in relationships, based on how their parents act toward each other (Rodman, n.d.).

Experiencing parental undermining can result in behavior problems for children, including tantrum and problems with authority and boundaries (Wright, n.d.). The long-term effects on children include problems with relationship, problems with employment, and/or legal issues (Wright, n.d.) Additionally, parental undermining can change a child's world view, lower self-esteem, cause self-hatred, lower self-confidence, and/or cause issues with inattention, depression, anxiety, and/or future addiction (Wright, n.d.).

### **What to Do Instead of Undermine**

If you keep the needs of your child as your highest priority, you are less likely to undermine the other parent. You can choose to respect your co-partner's role, even if you are having a hard time seeing anything else good in him/her. Have a civil, professional businesslike relationship with your co-parent for your child's sake.

It is also important for parents to be very careful about the way they talk to the children about the other parent, how they talk to others about the other parent, and how they talk to the other parent. If possible, it is best for parents to try to agree on basic parenting rules that apply in both homes. If you make and are committed to an agreement on your child and his/her schedule, you will be less tempted to the other parent or how the other parent does things.

If you have an issue with the other parent, rather than undermine the parent, communicate the issue directly to him/her in a respectful way and seek for solutions together. This is assertive behavior, which is much healthier than passive aggressive undermining. Communicate issues with your co-parent out of ear-shot of your children, always. If more appropriate, communicate your issues to a legal advisor or mediator, so that a solution can be reached.

## References

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