

# Helping Children Stay Out of Parental Conflict

**D**isagreements between parents are normal in any family. However, when conflict becomes frequent, intense, or too difficult to resolve, it can begin to affect children in ways parents may not immediately notice.<sup>i</sup> A common way this happens is when children become involved in the parents' arguments, or when they get caught in the middle, which researchers call "child triangulation."<sup>ii</sup> Although triangulation is often studied in adolescents, enough research shows that even younger children, including infants, preschoolers, and elementary school children are sensitive to parents' conflict and may be deeply affected by it.<sup>iii</sup> Thus, exposure to parental conflict is especially concerning in early (ages 3 to 8) and middle (ages 9 to 11) childhood, child do not yet have the ability to fully understand adult disagreements. As a result, they may feel confused, scared, or responsible for the conflict.<sup>iv,v</sup>

## What does being 'caught in the middle' mean?

You may have heard of the term "caught in the middle" many times. In terms of parental conflict, a child becomes 'caught in the middle' when one or both parents involve them in disagreements, intentionally or unintentionally. For example, a parent might say to their child, "Your mom is always mad at me, I don't know why she is so mean to me." In this situation, the parent is sharing their frustration with the child. Even if the parent may just be venting, they are sharing negative feelings about the other parent, which the child may take in and feel pressured to react to. It is important for parents to be aware that whether or not the other parent is in the room, saying negative comments about the other parent can create feelings of being 'caught in the middle' for the child. Below are some more examples showing how words can triangulate children in parental conflict:

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What a parent may say to their child	How they may be triangulating their child
<i>"Tell your dad that you think I am right."</i>	Asking your child to take sides between parents.
<i>"Go tell mommy that dinner is ready. She can come eat with us if she is done sulking."</i>	Using your child to send messages with negative emotional tones to the other parent when you are in an active argument.
<i>"You think I did the right thing, right?"</i>	Seeking reassurance from your child, which is asking them to go beyond their developmental abilities.
<i>"Can you talk to mommy for me?"</i>	Expecting your child to help resolve conflict when they are too young to even understand the content of the conflict.

## Why does this matter?

It is good to know and remember that children usually cannot fully understand what is happening during difficult situations. They may not realize that their parents can disagree as partners while still being loving parents to them. Because of this, children are more likely to misunderstand why their parents are arguing and what the conflict means.<sup>vi</sup> As a result, they may feel confused or even believe that the conflict is somehow their fault.<sup>vii</sup> This might happen because children often see themselves as connected to and part of both parents. That's why when one parent is criticized, children may interpret those negative comments as criticisms of themselves. Consequently, children experiencing parental conflict may:

- Feel responsible for fixing the conflict and may attempt to intervene.<sup>viii</sup> For example, a child may intervene and say, "Please stop fighting," or try to physically bring both parents closer.
- Experience confusion, fear, or insecurity and anxiety.<sup>ix</sup> For example, a child might feel scared when voices get loud and worry that their parents might leave them.
- Feel forced to take sides due to divided loyalties between both parents.<sup>x</sup> For example, a child may feel like they have to agree with one parent or choose which parent to comfort even if it hurts their relationship with the other parent.
- Withdraw from interactions, distract themselves, or emotionally shut down.<sup>xi</sup> For example, a child might go to their room, play on a device to ignore the conflict, stop talking or seem distant.

Research suggests that experiencing parental conflict increases stress in children, as indicated by increased cortisol, called the 'stress-hormone' in children.<sup>xii</sup> Beyond constant increase in stress, studies show that ongoing tensions between parents can affect children's development over time.<sup>xiii</sup> When children frequently see or hear their parents arguing, or feel pulled into those disagreements,<sup>xiv</sup> they are more likely to experience internalizing and externalizing problems,<sup>xv</sup> regardless of how children interpret the conflict. Internalizing problems include increased anxiety and sadness, and externalizing problems include aggression, anger issues, or acting out.<sup>xvi</sup> These effects often begin very early in life. Research also shows that the way parents handle conflict during a child's early years can lead to children's behavior problems later in elementary school, such as aggression, rule breaking, and social withdrawal.<sup>xvii</sup> Over time, these patterns may continue and affect their relationships, mental health, and <sup>xviii</sup> life outcomes in adulthood.<sup>xix</sup>

## What can parents do for children to prevent or reduce triangulation?

As parents and humans, we cannot avoid all disagreements. Any well-meaning parent would not like to burden their children with adult conflict or emotional stress. But both due to stress and the natural tendency to be defensive, triangulation also happens. Instead of trying to avoid disagreements altogether, the better goal is to protect children from being involved in adult conflict and maintain their sense of safety:

### 1. Establish clear boundaries.

Parents should avoid venting about the other parent to children, friends or others, and not use children to deliver messages or take sides.<sup>xix</sup> Setting such boundaries can help them feel secure and keep them out of adult conflict. For example, if you sense an argument starting in front of your child you can say to your spouse or partner, "I think we should continue this later when are by ourselves so that we don't involve our kid."

### 2. Model constructive conflict resolution.

Even with the harmful effects of exposure, hiding all disagreements from children may not be a good idea as it may later affect their social interactions.<sup>xx</sup> Rather, it is about how conflict is expressed that matters. Exposure to constructive conflict, one that is respectful, supportive, and focused on problem-solving, can help support the development of conflict-resolution skills.<sup>xxi</sup> Thus, such exposures, especially when children are given some explanation of why disagreement occurred, may be helpful.<sup>xxii</sup> Children may even learn conflict resolution skills and problem-solving techniques from such exposure, particularly when parents have intentional conversations with their children about conflicts.

### 3. Attempt to repair things when children may be exposed to harmful parental conflict.

Sometimes, despite best efforts, conflicts may not always be handled constructively. Parents and former partners are not perfect, and some disagreements may become emotionally charged or harmful in front of children. When this happens, it is important to attempt to repair and reconnect. If children happen to overhear an intense argument, reassure them that the conflict is not their fault, they do not need to fix it, and you as adults will take care of it.<sup>xxiii</sup> This can help lower children's stress and show them that relationships can recover even after difficult interactions.



**4. Encourage them to express their emotions, validate their feelings, and be approachable.**

Triangulation can leave children feeling trapped and confused. Sometimes it can interfere with parents' ability to be sensitive towards the child.<sup>xxiv</sup> However, sensitivity is what they may need most. Thus, parents should provide them with a safe space to talk, listen calmly, and avoid criticizing the other parent. Because remaining calm during conflict can be difficult, parents can use some simple self-soothing techniques before talking to children, such as taking a few deep breaths, pausing before reacting, or stepping away briefly to collect your thoughts. When talking to children, acknowledge that their feelings of fear, guilt, and worry are normal and understandable. Children are more likely to share feelings when parents respond calmly and without judgment. Reassure them that they are safe and protected and avoid sharing your own frustrations in ways that may involve your child.<sup>xxv</sup>

**5. Acknowledge past triangulation and encourage open communication with children.**

If children have been previously caught in your conflict, even unintentionally,<sup>xxvi</sup> explain that this was unfair, that resolving conflicts is adults' responsibility, and they were pulled into conflict they are not equipped to handle.<sup>xxvii</sup> Use it as a learning opportunity and encourage them to speak up if they feel 'caught in the middle' in the future, as well as to process what they are feeling and what could be done in the future to make them feel safe.<sup>xxviii</sup>

**6. Maintain warmth and support.**

Strong parent-child relationships can help protect them from the effects of conflict. Be warm and responsive towards your child, show your emotional support, and engage with them positively to protect their adjustment outcomes even when parental disagreements occur.<sup>xxix</sup>

Disagreements are a normal part of family life, but children should not be made to feel responsible for their parents' conflict. Children are still learning how relationships work, and they may misunderstand what they see and hear during arguments. By setting clear boundaries, repairing exposure, and encouraging warm relationships and open communication, parents can help children feel secure and safe. These actions can also reduce the chances of children becoming caught in the middle and lessen potential long-term impacts of conflict on their development.

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