



Children of Separation & Divorce

Children of separation and divorce experience a cluster (syndrome) of issues and symptoms in addition to those that any child may experience otherwise as a toddler, child, adolescent or teen. While much has been written and documented of this in the literature, it is well to summarize them when drafting or entering into a Parenting Plan Order, Temporary Orders, and/or a Decree of Dissolution or Parentage. Unless these issues and their symptoms are recognized, a well-intended parent may easily confuse their children's messages as meaning something other than what the child was truly meaning to communicate – whether on the surface or subconsciously.

1. *Child Says They Do Not Want to Go to or Be with the Other Parent.*

- a. Presentation: Child states, cries, begs, expresses fear, becomes ill or refuses to go/be with other parent.
- b. Meaning/Translation: Child may be insecure in separating parent's love and is acting in a way that will gain that parent's approval. The child wonders, "Does the parent approve of me going?" "Will the parent still love me if I go?" "Will the parent welcome me back when I return?" "What if I have a good time with the other parent?" The child fears being guilty.
- c. Remedial Action: Show the child you truly hear them by reflecting back to them what you heard. Then, reassure the child that (1) you want them to have time with the other parent; (2) that you will be there when they return; and (3) that you will love them no matter what. The child will take their cues from you. If you are comfortable and confident, so will they be. But if there is an objective basis for reluctance or it persists, then seek the advice of a professional.

2. *Child Wants to Report on Activity or Condition of Other Parent or Their Home.*

- a. Presentation: Child volunteers information to a parent that is invariably adverse to the other parent, their home, their behavior or their activities. This may include smoking, drinking, foods served, discipline, or introduction/time spent with a significant other.
- b. Meaning/Translation: "I know you don't approve of this or the behavior, so if I tell you something bad supporting that, you will love me even more – and more than the other."
- c. Remedial Action: Be clear and firm that you are uninterested in what happens with the other parent or in their household. If the comment is not one related to the child's health or well-being, simply say, "I know that you have just had some experiences with (other parent), but you are at MY house now and so let's focus on what WE are doing now and what WE will be doing now!" If the comment does relate to health, safety or well-being, listen without giving judgment, make a note, and check it out or report it (not necessarily as truth, but as something you heard) to the other or an appropriate person or authority. If it is distressing, confront the other parent outside the presence of the child and verify the accuracy of the child's report.

3. *Child Exaggerates or Fabricates a Statement about a Behavior, Condition or Occurrence.*

- a. Presentation: A child may make a statement about the other parent, their home or behavior that is simply not true; or they may such exaggerate by their words. Yes, even the best of our darling children have been documented to have done this, and so may yours!

- b. Meaning/Translation: The child is attempting to gain some control over their world that they now see as spinning out of control. They realize the parents focused on them before the separation and this behavior can return the focus to them and their world. This is a variation of a child's common means of attempting to manipulate their environment, to gain autonomy and control. They know that what they say or report will affect the listening parent's response.
 - c. Remedial Action: The parent should reflect back what you seem to be hearing and check to make sure that you heard it right. You should not respond strongly in action or emotion to the child, as to do so will give currency and weight to the statement. The parent doesn't need to say they distrust the child or the statement – just say nothing of a judgmental nature. Listen carefully and make a note to check out the facts later, outside the presence of the child.
4. ***Child Makes Inconsistent Statements To Each Parent or to a Professional.***
- a. Presentation: A child will make different, contradictory statements or accounts to each of the parents or to one parent and a professional. It is not uncommon for a child to say to each parent that they want to live with or spend more time with that parent. This may trigger a parent into believing the statement and perhaps even thinking it would be repeated to the other parent, to take action opposed to that of the other parent. Usually the parent does not know that the same statement or claim is being made to the other parent, as well.
 - b. Meaning/Translation: This is an advanced form of manipulation of the separated parents or homes, borne of a child's loyalty and seeking of parental love from both parents. If the parents fight over the child or residential time, then the child again becomes the center of focus, and the child may even fantasize that the parents will reunite. Most children seek this, both for their own comfort and because in some measure they feel responsible for the parents' separation or divorce.
 - c. Remedial Action: Do not place undo weight on such statements, unless voluntarily made to a third person professional in the case. Certainly, under no circumstances should a parent seek a child's opinion or decision on where they wish to live. To do so places the child back in the middle of the battlefield, with each parent then vying to influence the child to make statements favorable to their side. This may, in turn, cause anti-social behavior, school grades to suffer and the child to experience depression or even consider suicide.
5. ***Child Seeks Material Goods, Special Activities, or Travel.***
- a. Presentation: The child seeks or elicits a promise from a parent of a material good, trip or other benefit. Younger children seek toys and computer games; older children want cell phones and Facebook accounts; oldest children want their own cars, to travel, and to go to the college of their choice, despite the cost, location or quality of the education offered.
 - b. Meaning/Translation: The child is attempting to gain or make the most of the situation. While it may seem manipulative to play the parents off against one another, it can lead to a concrete gain for the child out of the circumstance wherein there are fewer total assets and lower household income, due to the separation of the parents. This is one way that the child can better their own standard of living, or at least return it somewhat to what it was.
 - c. Remedial Action: Enter into this game at your own risk! The parent who responds may find that they gain a Pyrrhic victory, as really they are entering into a bidding war, with the residence or the affection of the child now being reduced to a commercial commodity. Their influence or "win" will last only as long as it takes for the next issue to arise.

Parents may say, "Not my children -- *my* children would not do any of these!" Perhaps not, but be prepared! There is ample literature and the experience of many, professionals in Family Law practice who can bear witness to this happening, to momentarily blinded parents, in family after family.