

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Divorced Parents with Different Rules

Promoting the Life Skill of Perspective Taking in School Age Children

Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: When my daughter goes to her dad's house, he has different rules. When she comes home, she thinks she can do whatever she wants. I am tired of the battle, but I don't want her to stop visiting her dad. How can I help her adjust between the different house rules?

Negotiating the different rules, expectations and personalities involved when parents are divorced or separated is challenging for the whole family. It can be a highly emotional situation, and there is likely to be some conflict as you figure out what works best for you, your child and her father. By promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking, you can help your child understand and respect the different expectations of each parent without battles while still enjoying the time she spends with both of you.

According to Philip Zelazo of the University of Minnesota, reflection—the ability to consider someone else's thinking alongside your own—is essential for Perspective Taking and for problem solving.

1. Perspective Taking starts with you. Think about your own perspective and how you are responding to this situation. If you—understandably—feel angry or stressed, it is likely your child will, too. Your words, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language all communicate to your child how you really feel.

Also, try to take the perspective of your child's father. For example, he—like other divorced fathers—may be trying to make up for the divorce by letting her do whatever she wants so there is little conflict while they are together or by buying gifts to compensate for the loss. If you understand your child's father's motives, it may make dealing with this situation easier.

- If you feel that it is important to talk with your child's father, then it's best to keep your comment neutral, not critical or blaming. Stirring up old wounds would make the situation worse. You can say something like: "I have found that it really helps our daughter in going through the divorce to have some structure—she seems to feel safer that way." If he responds positively, try to come up with solutions that work for both of you.

Whether or not you and your child's father can work on this together, the task for you is to help your child—as you put it—"adjust between the different house rules."

Know that learning to deal with differences in the way that their parents care for them is an important life lesson for all children. Whether in homes where parents are together or in homes where they are separated or divorced, no two adults actually "parent" in exactly the same way. Learning to respond to these differences helps children develop the ability to respond to other differences in people throughout their lives.

Through his research, Ross Thompson of the University of California at Davis has found that parents' styles of expressing feelings impact how children learn Perspective Taking. As Thompson puts it, children gain insight into "what goes on in people's hearts and minds" depending on how parents interpret "the everyday events of their lives." They also learn from talking about their own feelings.

2. Have a discussion with your child about her feelings in switching between two sets of rules.

- Ask your child questions that encourage a back and forth conversation, not just a yes or no answer. Ask things like: “How does it feel to have different rules at your dad’s and your mom’s house?” The more your child talks about her own feelings, the better she will be at understanding and responding to other people’s points of view.
- Although your child may like one set of rules better than the other, it is best to be matter of fact about the fact that the rules are different, and it is her responsibility to follow the rules that each of you set.

3. Help your child understand that lots of people have different rules.

- Point out to your child all of the different rules she already follows in her life. She switches between school rules, the rules at family member’s houses and the rules of being out in public. Ask her if she can think of any other examples.

It can also be helpful if you explain the reasons behind your rules. Keep the explanations simple and clear:

- You can say things like: “I need you to take good care of your clothes and not leave them on the floor, but put them in the laundry basket.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics acknowledges the major stress that comes along with any significant family change, like parental separation and divorce. They suggest that:

For children of all ages, the goal after such an event is to create a new life that is secure and predictable with ensured or reestablished close ties to loved ones.

4. Set your child up for success. Child psychiatrists Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess described the idea of “goodness of fit,” that a person feels able to meet the expectations of others. You want your child to experience this goodness of fit and feel capable of following rules and meeting your expectations. Help her do this by making your rules clear and doable.

- Keep your rules consistent and follow through with the consequences you have decided on. Your child depends on you to stay reliable even if things feel unstable.
- If you find yourself focusing on the negative or getting into battles, try reinforcing any positive actions in your child by commenting on them like: “It was so helpful that you threw the trash into the wastebasket!”
- If you are feeling upset about your child’s not following your rules, ask yourself what you are expecting of her and of yourself. Step back and look at your own perspective. Are your expectations realistic? For example, maybe it isn’t possible for your child to get all of her homework done at her father’s house. See if you can come up with a compromise that works for all of you.

5. Problem solve with your child to come up with strategies for dealing with the transition between her father’s home and your home. This is the most important strategy to use. When you and your child engage in a problem-solving process together, you are helping her learn to gain Executive Function skills.

Executive Functions are the skills we use to manage our thoughts, our feelings and behavior to achieve goals. Phil Zelazo of the University of Minnesota says:

If you want to start to characterize more precisely what’s meant by Executive Function, think in terms of the sequential steps that people must undertake in order to solve any problem in a goal-directed fashion.

Studies have found that when children develop Executive Function skills, they are more likely to thrive now and in the future.

The first step is to determine the problem. You can explain to your child that you often get into battles with each other, and you want to come up with better ways of managing.

- Talk with your child about what is hardest for her in making the transition from one home to another and from one set of rules to another. Write down the issues she faces, without any judgment.

The second step is to encourage your child to think of ways she might solve these problems.

- Brainstorm as many ways as you each can come up with to solve these problems. Again, write them down without judgment.

The third step is to evaluate the solutions. Here you ask your child to take her own and others' perspectives.

- Ask your daughter what would work and what wouldn't work about each of the suggested solutions. Have her keep in mind whether it would work for her, for you and for her father.

The fourth step is to come up with a strategy to try out to make things better.

- Decide with your daughter which strategy or strategies you are going to experiment with. Set a time period to get back together to discuss how it's working.

The fifth step, after some time has passed, is to evaluate how the solution or solutions are working.

- When you get together to talk about what is working and what isn't, make sure that you look at it from the perspectives of all involved.

When your child takes some responsibility for solving the problems she faces, she is more likely to follow through on the solutions than if she is simply being told what to do. In effect, you are giving her a skill for life!

These five strategies will promote the life skill of Perspective Taking and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel, and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers' and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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