

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Divorced Parents with Different Rules

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. How can I help her adjust between the different house rules?

Managing the different rules, expectations and personalities involved are 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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."

2

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

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.

For more ways to help your child learn and develop, visit
mindinthemaking.org and vroom.org

MIND in the Making
The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

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.

- **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.
- **Set boundaries about the rules.** Although your child may like one set of rules better than the other, it is best to be direct 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.”

4

Set your child up for success.

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.

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.

- **Consistency and Follow Through.** 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.

- **Focus on Positive.** 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!"
- **Assess Yourself.** 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Evaluate how the solution or solutions are working after some time has passed.

- 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!